INTERVIEWING GUIDELINES

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INTERVIEWING GUIDELINES

1. Introduction

This chapter contains general guidelines for interviewing, procedures for handling special difficulties, special considerations for interviewing elderly persons, and specific guidelines including how to probe for answers.

2. Interviewer roles

Although the ultimate goal of the research interview is standardized and reliable collection of data, the interviewer also plays an important role in serving as the human conduit of information from participants to the database. The way the interviewer conducts the interviews both facilitates and standardizes the gathering of the data. The following are some of the important roles of the interviewer:

2.1 Represent the study

- As an interviewer, you are the participant's link with the research project. While you do not act alone in the relationship with the participant, an unpleasant interview experience could tip the balance for a participant who is beginning to lose interest or is contemplating withdrawal.

- Always be polite. Remember, you represent the project and your co-workers. Call participants by name to make their experience more personal. Use titles (Ms., Mrs.) and last names unless the participant requests otherwise.

- Impart to the participants respect for the confidentiality of the information they provide by focusing your attention on them alone.

- Leave the participant with an overall feeling of well-being. The goal is to make the participant's encounters pleasant enough to be worth repeating.

- Be friendly but not chummy. Use a manner of speaking that is natural to you. If your usual style is too casual, then with your supervisor's help, develop a genuine firm and even manner.

- Approach the interview with pleasure and assume that the participant will do the same. Most people like being asked about themselves and their well-being; you are giving participants an opportunity to express themselves.

- Dress for a supporting, not a starring role in the survey scenario. Neatness and professionalism are the rule.

- When appropriate, keep contact notes on your conversations with participants for use by other research staff. Record participant information that another interviewer might reasonably be expected to know, not gossipy kinds of information.

- Review contact notes before each new contact. Be careful when using comments recorded by another interviewer. There is a difference between "remembering" a participant and "talking about" a participant, which may be interpreted as a breach of confidentiality.

2.2 Manage the interview

- Control and focus the interview without dominating the participant. Your job is to get information, not to show what you know. The participant's answers to the questions are important. You convey that importance by your professional demeanor, by maintaining control of the situation, and by focusing on the content of the interview.

- Be politely firm and businesslike; timidity signals lack of confidence. If you communicate insecurity or hesitancy to participants, some of them will take advantage and assume a power position, others will feel sympathetic and assume a "mother" position. In either case, the participant's responses could be biased: The participant assuming the power position could distort strong opinions to keep the position; the mothering participant could try to make the interviewer's job easier by answering obligingly.

2.3 Collect data

- Understand the purpose and meaning of the data items on the forms. If you don't understand, ask your supervisor for clarification.

- Take no personal stake in the content of the interview. Make sure your opinions and behavior neither add to nor subtract from the research intention of any items on the forms.

2.4 Clarify the nature of the research setting

Whether you are conducting the interview in the home or in the clinic setting, the participant will be seen in a clinic setting and should continue to be informed that although the clinical center resembles a medical clinic, it is not a medical care facility. The participant should be aware that you as an interviewer are not a caregiver, helper, or advisor. The following characteristics distinguish clinical centers from medical care facilities:

1) Personnel who staff the clinical centers are part of a research team.

2) Research project interviewers are not caregivers, helpers, or advisors. The following is a sample explanation you can give to a participant who may have forgotten the distinction between a clinical research center and a medical care facility that has been presented to them on previous visits:

"Because this is a research study, when you go in for your physical examination, you may notice some similarities between our clinical center and your physician's office. This can create some confusion about what to expect when you come to visit us.

"We want you to know that we are not your primary care providers. While we perform some of the same procedures as your physician, we do not collect complete information on your health. Your family physician or primary care provider knows you best and can provide you with complete medical care or refer you to other physicians or specialists.

"We are concerned about you and your health, however, so we offer the following:

"We refer you to your family physician or primary care provider if we find something that we feel you should know about or should check more thoroughly."

3) Individuals who take part in the study are *participants*, not patients -- they join and remain voluntarily.

4) Participants contribute to the content of scientific knowledge without gaining much for themselves.

3. General guidelines

A data collection instrument is only as good as the interviewer's skills in using it, and good interviewing requires very special skills.

3.1 Interviewer preparation

Studies have shown that a participant often remembers more about the interviewer and how the interview was conducted than about the topics covered during the interview. This finding emphasizes important aspects of interviewing:

- An interviewer must be an understanding person capable of accepting what the participant says without showing reactions of either approval or disapproval; the participant must feel that their ideas are important, and that there are no right or wrong answers.

- An interviewer must not influence the participant by anything they say or do.

- An interviewer must help the participant feel that the interview is an important contribution to research.

For successful interviewing, you should have broad knowledge of the research project interview task as well as of the forms and how to fill them out. Your knowledge base should include the following:

1) Understand the nature of research interviewing:

An interview is a social interaction designed to exchange information between a questioner and a participant. The quality of the information exchanged depends upon the skill of the interviewer in handling that relationship.

2) Understand the scope of research interviewing:

The research project interviewer collects data that will answer research questions and aid in policy decisions in public health.

3) Understand the objective of the research interview:

- The research interview contains elements that separate it from other kinds of interviewing. Strictly speaking, the research interview is a relationship in which the interviewer has the practical, utilitarian goal of data collection. Research project interviewers must combine the utilitarian objective with the more social objective of participant retention.

- The retention objective is an important one, and social interaction should be a part of every interview. But it is also important that the interview not drift into lengthy conversation. Conversation of a general nature for the purpose of participant bonding should be confined to a few minutes at the beginning and the end of participant visits or phone calls.

4) Understand the significance of research interviewing:

The research project is dependent upon the reliability and validity of the data collected by its interviewers. Bias in interviewing can compromise data.

- The interviewer reduces the chance of bias by presenting neutral reactions to all answers and by maintaining a brisk, regular pace of question delivery. Regardless of how carefully worded the questions and how neutrally presented, research interviews are subject to bias from two sources: interviewer delivery and participant responses. It is the interviewer's job to minimize bias from either source.

- Interviewers can introduce bias into survey results by interpreting answers, favoring one answer over another, treating some questions as sensitive, reacting to liked or disliked participant characteristics, or using slanted probes or positive or negative filler words. To avoid these potential sources of bias, interviewers must perfect both neutral delivery and neutral response.

- Participants can bias their responses by trying to answer questions when they simply don't know the answers. Even when participants know the answers, they don't always give them truthfully. They often don't realize that they're not being truthful. Participants may bias their responses unconsciously by slanting answers to make themselves feel better, to give responses they think their friends would, or to provide answers they think the interviewer expects. The interviewer overcomes participants' emotional, unconscious bias tendencies by presenting questions at a regular pace and by maintaining neutrality.

5) Know the forms thoroughly:

- Follow all instructions and suggested scripts contained on the form itself and in the operations manual. Following or not following the instructions, scripts, or recommended remarks makes the difference between consistent and inconsistent data.

- Study the questions and data items on the forms so that you understand what they mean. Become familiar enough with them so that you can *ask* the questions instead of *reading* them, but don't try to ask questions from memory alone. Use the form as a reference at all times. Practice parts of the interviews that seem awkward or unnatural to you until you can ask the questions in a natural manner.

- Review the instructions for each form regularly. Do not rely solely on memory for detailed instructions on form use.

- Use the scripted parts of the interview as they are written. Discuss with your supervisor the content and flow of recommended remarks, especially when in doubt about appropriate procedures to follow in unusual situations. It is important to communicate to your supervisor and, if appropriate, the Coordinating Center for the study, any specific problems and suggestions for improvement.

3.2 Conditions of interviewing

Strive to achieve the following conditions:

- All interviewing should be done in privacy. You cannot expect the same answers when a person speaks in front of others as when they speak to you alone. Also, an interview conducted with others present will take longer to complete. If others are present, make every effort to get them to leave the room. It is not impolite to indicate you were told to interview the participant alone.

- It is possible that an over-protective relative or a shy participant will not permit a private interview. In these situations you must focus on the target participant and minimize any participation from the other person.

  - It may also be possible to enlist the help of the participant in asking the other person to permit the participant to answer for themselves.
  - If the other person continues to insist on intruding, firmly state you have been told to get the participant's answers only, but that you could talk with the other person briefly after you have finished the interview.
  - Then be pointed in directing your questions to the participant and in maintaining steady eye contact with the participant.

Both of you should be seated comfortably in a quiet location. Try to be in a position that will:

- allow you to have easy eye contact with the participant

- enable you to be heard without raising your voice
- avoid light glaring in either the participant's or your eyes
- permit you to write unobtrusively

Always carry a clipboard with you for writing in case there is no table convenient on which to write.

3.3 Delivery

1) Set the appropriate pace:

- Use a brisk, businesslike pace, but don't rush the participant or show impatience.
- Vary from your established pace on cues from the participant. If the participant shows frustration or lack of understanding, then slow down. If the participant shows annoyance or jumps in with answers to anticipated questions, then speed up. But do not skip questions.

2) Maintain a neutral tone:

Speak distinctly, without unusual inflection that could draw undue attention to part of a question. Do not place emphasis on specific response alternatives.

3) Maintain a neutral response:

- Record information faithfully regardless of whether you think it's good, bad, boring, or exciting. Keep your reactions to yourself, no matter what you may think of an individual or the feelings expressed. Practice *not feeling* a reaction; school yourself out of emotional attachment to the information you hear.
- Inspire confidence by your detachment so that participants feel comfortable giving you the unvarnished truth. Do not indicate surprise, pleasure, approval, or disapproval of any answer by word or action. Do not smile, grimace, gasp, laugh, frown, agree, or disagree. Even a slight intake of breath or a raised eyebrow may indicate to a participant that you are reacting to an answer. Project smooth, gracious acceptance of information, no matter how outrageous the content.

4) Deliver the questions thoughtfully:

- Make your delivery smooth, natural, and enthusiastic. Avoid sounding like a robot. Sound fresh for everyone. You may ask the same questions a dozen times in a day, but participants hear them only once in their interview.
- Use the questions, scripts, or recommended remarks as they are written, without apology. Do not try to justify questions or to defend a line of inquiry; you are asking questions that have been asked of many other participants. Tell your supervisor if you find a problem with the wording of a question.

- Emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers; the only thing that matters is the truth from the participant.

3.4 Special difficulties

At times you may confront some difficulties in interviewing. Some suggestions on how to handle special situations follow:

1) A participant with difficulty hearing:

- Sit close enough to the participant so that you do not have to shout. Make sure your face is clearly visible and not obscured by hair, glare, or shadows for participants who might rely on lip-reading.

- Slow down for participants with hearing problems and speak in lower-pitched (more bass-pitched, not soft- spoken or high-pitched) tones. If you need to increase the volume, move closer to the participant to avoid shouting. For some people the more you raise your voice, the more distorted the voice sounds to the participant and the harder you are to hear. The participant may also turn their "good" ear toward you. Take this cue to speak clearly and distinctly toward that side.

- If necessary, let the participant read the questions from a blank form while you read the questions aloud.

2) A participant with limited vision:

If the participant is so visually impaired that they cannot read the materials you hand them, read the materials to the participant.

3) A participant with difficulty understanding a question:

- Take responsibility for making questions understandable.

  - Do not make participants feel that it's their fault if they don't understand a question.
  - Take away the burden of not remembering: participants shouldn't feel ashamed by lack of recall.
  - If a participant doesn't remember a date, lead a discussion back through some prominent seasons or events, repeating the phrase of the question as you go.

- If a participant does not understand a question, repeat the question clearly, slowly, and without raising your voice, possibly changing the emphasis of the words or the tone of your voice. Repeat it twice if the participant has patience for it. After that, record whatever answer the participant offers and go on. Don't risk annoying the participant for the sake of an answer to a single question.

- *Under no circumstances are you to reword, explain, or interpret the question.* Encourage the participant to do the best they can. If they still do not understand, treat as missing data and move on.

4) A very talkative participant:

- Frequently you will encounter a participant who wants to talk at much length about themselves or in a social manner, or a participant who is not able or willing to focus on the individual questions. While being accepting of the person and their needs, do not hesitate to interrupt the participant gently but firmly, saying something like, "I don't want to take up too much of your time, so let me ask you now: (repeat question)."

- It also helps to lose eye contact with the participant, look down at the interview instrument, then look up and say, "Perhaps you can tell me more about that when we are finished. Now I'd like to ask you...," "Isn't that interesting. Now let me ask you this...," as a last resort, "Excuse me, but let's get back to the question: (repeat question)."

5) A participant who becomes upset:

- Very occasionally a participant will become upset or cry during the interview. Talking about cancer or heart disease can arouse emotion in many people. Participants who have recently lost loved ones, especially to one of these illnesses, may become upset with some questions.

- If this happens, decide where your responsibility as a person begins. There are no hard and fast rules. Remain calm but not distant or cold; let the emotion run its course. Have tissues available. Often participants who have experienced losses express strong motivation to continue with the project to contribute to the disease prevention effort.

- Generally, you should be sympathetic without becoming involved. Do not routinely probe as to why the participant is upset or crying. In some cases it may be helpful to divert the participant's attention from their distress back to the interview. In fact, it may sometimes be very reassuring to the person for you simply to say, in a matter-of-fact voice, "Now let me ask you... (next question)." In others, this may have an adverse effect. When the participant is able, return to the interview. If the interview is completed and the participant is still upset, don't leave them until they have regained composure. If necessary socialize to help accomplish this.

- It is, of course, imperative that you not try to be a psychotherapist. It is one thing to be an understanding listener who conveys human sympathy but quite another to participate actively in drawing out material relating to personal problems. The latter should not be done. Each center should establish a channel through which a referral for counseling or emergency help might be obtained if necessary. Unless it is a matter of risk to the life of a person, however, no such referral can be made without the prior permission of the interviewee.

- Stop the interview if a participant is clearly unable to finish the visit. Offer a quiet place; get a supervisor or manager to help. If you cannot reschedule immediately, be sure to arrange to call the participant within a few days—just to make sure everything is all right and to try to reschedule the visit.

6) A participant who is unable to handle the interview:

In some very few cases it will be apparent that the participant is not physically, intellectually, and/or emotionally capable of participating in the interview, although they have agreed to do so.

- Judgment to discontinue the interview is to be made by you based not upon incorrect answers to any single or group of factual or other questions, but upon a trend indicating gross cognitive incompetence, inability to comprehend the questions, inappropriate answers, or grossly contradictory answers. These would indicate the instrument will not obtain meaningful information about the participant and is probably a severe burden to the participant.

- Be alert, however, to distinguish the participant who is not oriented as to time, place etc., yet can give good information about their life, in which case the interview can be conducted.

- It may be appropriate, however, to conduct a proxy interview. If the interviewer observes changes in the participant's behavior and responses to questions that indicate that the participant does not understand questions, a proxy interview may be necessary (see Chapter 4 for instruction about when to do a proxy interview).

7) A participant who has strong objections to questions:

- Assume the burden of communication; take the blame for misunderstandings.

  - If a participant fails to grasp the meaning of a question, admit that perhaps you didn't deliver it clearly and repeat the question.
  - Do not give the participant the impression that the questions were too difficult for them to answer.

- If the participant is angry, reluctant, or impatient about a single question or series of questions, respond in a non-defensive tone as though you have heard the objection before. Don't delay the interview any more than necessary; move on to the next question. If the participant pursues the objection, remind the participant that although the researcher had a purpose in including the question in the interview, the participant doesn't have to answer the question.

- If a participant hesitates or refuses to answer, repeat the question. Say, "Let me go over that again. If you don't want to answer, that's your choice; but my instructions are to ask each of the questions." Add that the participant's feelings or opinions about the question are important. If the participant still refuses, accept the refusal graciously and go on to the next question.

8) A participant who is impatient with the length of the interview:

If a participant is anxious to finish the interview and says so, say, "I need only a few more minutes of your time. Your answers are important to us, and we'd like to have all of them."

9) A participant who is curious about the research:

- Be ready with standard replies for people who want to know more about the research. Do not get involved in long explanations of the project, the forms, the research methods, or the outcomes of the study. Be sure to use standard responses.

- Treat as extraneous conversation remarks from participants who want you to tell them why certain questions are included in the interview. Do not invent your own explanations.

- For participants who persist, tell them that the researcher had a purpose for the question and that you must ask all the questions as they are written. Invite participants to talk to your supervisor if they wish to carry a discussion further.

3.5 Special considerations for interviewing elderly persons

Interviewing older persons is basically similar to interviewing persons of any age. There is considerable variation among older people just as there is among persons of other ages. Most of the older persons you will interview will be able to respond to all questions.

- Many older persons have had little experience being interviewed. A major task of the interviewer is to clarify what is expected of a participant and to guide them comfortably through the interview. Most people are pleased to be chosen as participants and to know that their answers may contribute to solving the problems of other people. Your personality and ability to put the participant at ease are usually all that are needed for a successful interview.

- Ask all questions, but most particularly those of a personal nature such as age and education in a straightforward, matter-of-fact tone of voice; accept all answers without showing surprise, approval, or disapproval.

- An interview is a two-way street: the participant must understand you and you must understand them. Speak clearly and slowly. Speaking quickly will not speed up an interview but rather, it may confuse the participant and actually slow up the interview. Always listen very carefully.

- Gauge your pace according to the needs of the participant. Some elderly participants may require a slower delivery; others may be insulted by it.

4. Specific guidelines

4.1 Interviewer instructions

Interviewer instructions are distinguished from questions to be asked of participants. They are not to be read to the participant.

4.2 Introductions

Sometimes an introductory sentence is used to ease into a question and maintain the flow of the questionnaire. Read the introduction to the participant as it is written.

4.3 Stem and conditional questions

- Stem or primary questions (those asked of all participants) are numbered and out at the left margin.

- Conditional questions (those asked of some participants) are generally enclosed in boxes. Arrows from the answer boxes for stem questions point the way to the conditional or to the next question.

4.4 Response options

Most of the questions have specific response options. (Yes, No, and Don't know are very common). The bubble corresponding to the participant's answer should be filled in. Only one bubble is marked per question, unless the instructions state otherwise.

4.5 Open-ended questions

The questionnaire may contain questions that do not have a series of response options, i.e., are open-ended. If an answer does not seem meaningful or complete, you can encourage the participant to expand or elaborate their answer by "probing."

- Probing must be nondirective, i.e., a question or statement by the interviewer that does not suggest an answer, but does stimulate further communication. ALL of us use nondirective probes every day when we say: "What do you mean?" "Tell me about the...?," "In what way?," "Yes?," "Why?," "I'd like to hear more about that...," "Uh-huh...," or "I see...." (See below for more details about probing).

4.6 Change of answer

- Never erase an answer. If the participant changes their mind while you are recording the answer to an open-ended question, just continue recording verbatim.

- If the participant changes their answer to a precoded question or you make a recording error, put a slash through the answer that has been incorrectly marked, and mark the correct one. Initial and date the correction.

- If at a later part of the interview the participant mentions something that adds to or contradicts an earlier response (e.g., a hospitalization is mentioned that was not reported earlier), or the participant draws attention to a previous omission (e.g., "Oh, I forgot to tell you about being in the hospital for cataracts."): probe to correct for obvious contradictions, e.g., "I must have gotten something wrong; you just said -- but I thought you said previously that...."

4.7 Other (SPECIFY) responses

Some questions combine the features of both precoded close-ended and open-ended questions. In addition to the precoded answer categories, provision is made to record an answer that does not fit into any of the precoded categories:

> "Other (Specify)." The word "Specify" or "Describe," enclosed in parenthesis, is an instruction to mark the code for "Other" and to write in the verbatim handwritten response.

4.8 Response cards

It is often easier for a person to answer a multiple choice question if the choices are on a card that is handed to the participant listing the response options. You will be directed by "interviewer notes" to show response cards, some of which are optional and some of which are required.

4.9 Editing

All answers must be obtained and recorded at the time of the interview. Nothing is to be written in afterwards. Check the questionnaire to see that all questions are answered completely while you are in the presence of the participant.

4.10 Account for every question

All questions are to be asked in the order in which they appear and exactly as they are printed. Ask every question unless there is a SKIP instruction. Never assume you know the answer. Record an answer for every question. Most questions generally include DON'T KNOW and REFUSED response options.

4.11 Be sure the participant's answer fits into a response category

If the participant replies in an ambiguous way, like "sometimes yes, sometimes no," to help them resolve this to a single answer, you might ask, "If you had to choose, is it usually yes or no?."

4.12 Do not question the validity of the participant's responses

If it appears by their response that the participant misunderstood a question, please repeat the question exactly as it is written on the questionnaire.

4.13 Special considerations for "frequency" questions

- Clarify the time span: Many questions ask about behavior "during the past twelve months" or "during the past year." From time to time reemphasize "past 12 months." It is usually a good idea to restate the time frame as "since this time last (May)."

- Obtain specific frequency responses: Frequency questions are generally precoded to translate unstructured answers into categories.

  - People don't usually think about the frequency of their behavior, and, therefore, some participants have difficulty in answering.
  - Repeating the question, stressing "about how often...," sometimes helps.
  - If the participant answers in a very general way, like "whenever I have time" or "pretty often," ask about how often this is on the average.
  - If the participant still cannot answer, read the categories and allow them to choose the most appropriate one.

4.14 Time frame for questions

Responses should apply to the participant at the time of the interview:

- Some questions are meant to assess the participant as they are at the moment, much like a snapshot of a person. If a participant is currently doing things differently than they usually do, decide for yourself whether the current situation is very temporary**.**

- If the participant's situation may or may not be temporary, code according to current functioning (e.g., if the participant is receiving help with activities of daily life because they are incapacitated with a broken hip, rate as "with help," because one cannot determine how long the condition will continue or if they will resume their former level of functioning.)

5. How to get adequate answers

5.1 Ask the questions exactly as worded and in the same order as they appear in the questionnaire

Minor changes in wording can completely change the meaning of a question. Unless each interviewer asks the questions exactly as shown, the answers may be meaningless. One exception to this rule is that for certain factual questions you should watch for inconsistencies and try to get the correct fact.

5.2 Don't try to explain the question

Be neutral. As indicated earlier, if a participant does not seem to understand a question, repeat the question slowly and clearly.

- Give the participant time to think about the question.
- Unless you have other information about handling specific questions, the only acceptable answer for a participant who wants to know what a question means is "Whatever it means to you."
- Never explain the meaning or purpose of a question unless the interviewer instructions authorize you to do so.

5.3 Don't define terms used in questions

Some participants may ask you what we mean by a word used in a question. Leave the matter of definition to the participant, except where the written instructions authorize a definition or alternative wording. Instead of offering your own definition (while another interviewer is suggesting a completely different definition to someone else), simply say "Whatever you think it means" or "just whatever it means to you" or "However you use the term."

5.4 Don't leave a question until you have an adequate answer or have determined that a participant can 't give a clearer answer

5.5 Don't accept a "don't know" without probing at least once

A participant may answer a question by saying "I don't know" when what they really mean is they never thought about it or they need time to think.

- Give them a chance to collect their thoughts and express them.
- With skillful help, with encouragement and time, an inarticulate participant may provide an answer to the question.
- In general, if a participant can make a judgment in favor of a response other than "don't know," the usefulness of the data is greatly increased.

5.6 Use neutral probes that do not suggest answers

Probes are needed to obtain more complete and detailed answers.

- All probes must be non-directive. That is, your probe must not suggest any particular answer to the participant.

- Probes should be used whenever the participant is hesitant in answering the questions.

  - when they seem to have trouble expressing themselves
  - when they seem too shy to speak at length
  - whenever there is any reason for the interviewer to think that the participant has not given a complete report of their thinking
  - reassuring probes are needed when a participant seems to lack confidence

5.7 Probing for answers to closed-ended questions

In closed-ended questions, the need for probing arises when the participant gives an answer that is not included in the response categories.

Example: The question, "Have you felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up?" asks the participant about general depression. You read the instructions and the question, and the participant says, "Well, everybody has those feelings sometimes."

Repeat the response categories, "Would you say you were down or depressed: Not at all, A little, Enough to bother you, Quite a bit, Very much so, or Extremely so?"

Participant: "Well, I was blue for a day or two."

Ask the participant to choose the category that fits best and repeat the categories.

5.8 Probing for answers to open-ended questions

In open-ended questions two problems call for probing: the need to *clarify* a response and the need to *get additional information* in a response.

- The following are examples of neutral probes to <u>clarify</u>:

  “What do you mean by that?” “Why do you say that?” “In what way was it a problem?” “Could you rephrase that?”

- The following are some examples of neutral probes to get <u>additional information:</u>

"Are there other (repeat the phrase from the question)?" "How else would you describe (repeat the phrase from the question)?" "What else (repeat phrase from the question)?"

5.9 Many interviewers forget to use two of the most effective neutral probes: silence and repeating the original question

- **The value of silence** in an interview is very important. The interviewer who can wait patiently and quietly with an interested expression on their face will soon find that 15 seconds of silence will elicit an answer to the question.

- **Repeating the question is another safe way of probing.** Be sure to repeat only the question as stated in the questionnaire. This is particularly useful when the participant answers a question irrelevantly. Without pointing out that the first answer was irrelevant, simply say "Isn't that interesting. And now let me ask you this (Repeat the question)." In some cases you must remind the participant of your frame of reference when you repeat a question. For example, if you ask "How long have you lived in the Bay Area?" a participant might say "I've lived in California all my life. You know, there really aren't many native Californians my age." Instead of coldly ignoring what the participant has said, acknowledge the answer, and repeat the question. In the above example, you might say "Is that so! And how long have you lived in the Bay Area?"

5.10 Other neutral probes that you will find useful are

"How do you mean?"

"In what way?"

"Please give me an example." OR "For example?" OR "For instance?"

"Please explain that a little."

"How are you using the term_?"

"How come?"

"Tell me more about that."

"What makes you feel that way?"

"I just want your impression."

"I just want your opinion."

"Anything at all -- even little things?"

"What else can you tell me about that?"

(Repeat the ambiguous term on a rising inflection, which suggests a question)

“If you had to choose, which would you say?”

5.11 Generally speaking we avoid some neutral probes in favor of others

- Instead of "Anything else?" which invites a "no," you'll find "What else?" or "What else can you tell me about that?" is more likely to elicit more answers.

- Instead of "Why?," which some people interpret as critical, you'll find "What makes you feel that way?" or "I'd be interested in your reasons" accomplishes the same purpose and is less likely to be threatening.

- Some of the kinds of questions used in ordinary conversation must be avoided because they suggest answers:

  Don't ask: “Do you mean A or B?" (unless you have asked a precoded question). This is not neutral because it suggests two possible answers and there may be others that do not occur to the interviewer but would occur to the participant if they were left to their own devices.

  Don't ask: "Do you mean (such and such)?" because many people tend to say "yes" to any suggestion either because it's easy or because they think it's the right answer.

  Don't ask: “Then you feel (such and such)?" Even though you're trying to summarize what the participant has already said, you may be placing the emphasis on the wrong part of their answer.

5.12 Watch your tone of voice (and facial expressions in face-to-face interviewing)

How you ask a question or probe can be just as important as the wording of the question. Be careful that a tone of censure or criticism does not creep into your voice. "What makes you feel that way?" is, for example, usually a good way to get people to explain their reasons, but "What makes you feel THAT way?" may suggest that only the insane would hold such a view. Similarly, your face may give you away.

5.13 Watch for vague answers

Some participants find it hard to verbalize and may have difficulty expressing their ideas. When people take refuge in vague generalities, probe for examples to help them clarify their ideas.

5.14 Guard against ambiguous answer

Certain terms may mean very different things to two or more people.

- Always ask yourself whether you are sure you know what a participant meant by an answer and whether another interviewer would have interpreted a given answer in exactly the same way.

- If anyone uses terms or phrases that could be interpreted differently by different people, you must go back to the ambiguous phrases and ask them: "How are you using the term_____ ?," "What do you have in mind when you say __?"

While this is a particular problem in open-ended questions, some participants will give vague answers to precoded questions, which must be probed.

5.15 Avoid "depends" or "qualified" answers

Never accept a "depends" or "qualified" answer the first time it is offered as a response to any question. Participants often use phrases such as "well, that depends," "yes, but...," "I really see both sides of that question," etc.. When a participant gives a qualified answer, we advise one of the following probes:

- Repeat the question (unless the response was such that it will sound as though you weren't listening).

- Preface the question with a phrase like: "well, in general," "on the whole," or "taking everything into consideration."

- Remind the participant that we want to know which statement comes closest to their views; use an introductory phrase such as "Well if you had to choose" or "Even though you're somewhere in the middle, which way do you lean?" and repeat the question.

- Occasionally a participant will answer with a genuine qualified or depends answer, which cannot be pushed into an existing code. If the participant insists upon answering in qualified terms after you have sufficiently probed, simply choose the DON’T KNOW response option.

5.16 Clarify one response before asking for more

"What else?" is an excellent probe for getting people to offer additional ideas on a subject. But before asking for other answers, use clarifying probes to encourage participants to explain what they have already said. If you don't clear up one response before asking for more, you'll wind up with a series of vague or ambiguous responses that are uncodable.

5.17 Make your probe consistent with the purpose of the question

Knowing a few neutral probes and asking them correctly is not enough. You must choose a probe that is appropriate for the particular kind of inadequate answer given.

- As we noted above, there is no point in probing "what else?" if the participant's previous answers were vague.

- Similarly, "Tell me more" may get you farther and farther away from your goal of getting the participant to choose one of several possible answers, and "If you had to choose..." would be a better candidate.

  If the participant has answered fully but used an ambiguous term, you will want them to clarify that term by using a probe like "How are you using the term?" rather than asking them to explain, which might encourage them to explain things that are clear without clarifying the ambiguous term.

  In the same way, a person who lacks confidence will not gain it simply because you repeat a question, whereas "I just want your opinion" or "What's your impression?" will be more likely to encourage them to answer.

- Some participants who are unsure of themselves may be more likely to respond to "Tell me any problems that occur to you -- even little things."

5.18 When in doubt as to what is needed, get more rather than less than may be needed

If you get more data than we need, we can ignore it. But if you get less than needed, we must either return to the participant or code "don't know." In order to avoid the unnecessary loss of important data, bear in mind the following rules:

- When in doubt whether to ask a question, ask it.
- When in doubt whether to probe for greater depth, probe.
- When in doubt whether to record, record.
- When in doubt whether to enter an explanatory, parenthetical note, enter it.

6. Quality assurance

6.1 Training requirements

The interviewer requires no special qualifications to perform this assessment. Previous interviewing experience will be helpful. Training should include:

- Read and study the following:
  → Overview of the Clinic Visit Operations Manual Chapter
  → Interviewing Guidelines material in the Clinic Visit Operations Manual

- Thoroughly review the interview component in the Clinic Visit Workbook
- Practice administering the questionnaire (using the cards) on volunteers (if possible, age-eligible volunteers).

6.2 Certification requirements

Observation and evaluation of two to three *mock* interviews (at least one mock interview should be observed by the QC Coordinator or their designate).

Observation and evaluation of one *actual* interview by the QC Coordinator or their designate.

6.3 Quality assurance checklist

Interviewing techniques

- ☐ Reads slowly, speaks clearly and uses appropriate inflection when speaking.
- ☐ Reduces the chance of bias by maintaining a neutral attitude toward participant's answers.
- ☐ Able to elicit accurate and complete information using non-directive probes.
- ☐ Keeps interview on track by presenting questions at a regular pace.
- ☐ Focus participant’s attention on questions while always being polite.
- ☐ Treats participants with respect.
- ☐ Maintains a professional and friendly manner; leaves participant with overall feeling of well-being.

Administration of the questionnaire

- ☐ Reads script and questions exactly as written on the questionnaire (same order, same wording).
- ☐ Response options read/not read when appropriate
- ☐ Uses all mandatory response cards with the appropriate questions.
- ☐ Uses optional response cards appropriately.
- ☐ Follows skip pattern in questionnaire.
- ☐ Accurately records participant's responses on questionnaire.
- ☐ Follows the guidelines for recording data on scannable forms.
- ☐ At the end of interview, reviews questionnaire for completeness.

STANDARDIZED SURVEY INTERVIEWING

Minimizing Interviewer-Related Error

Floyd J. Fowler, Jr.
Thomas W. Mangione

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an average of 50 interviews each, such an intraclass correlation would inflate standard errors by 32 percent; obviously the effect on standard errors is greater for questions with higher intraclass correlations.

Looked at from another perspective, Sanders (1962) reported that more than half the variance in the number of health conditions reported in a survey could be attributed to the interviewers.

As an example of results from a study using record checks, Cannell et al. (1977a) found a correlation of .72 between the size of an interviewer's assignment and the percentage of known hospitalizations reported to interviewers in a health survey.

CONCLUSION

Using any of the several approaches to detecting interviewer error described above, there is a great deal of evidence that interviewers are an important source of error in surveys. Although it is easy for research organizations and researchers to ignore interviewer-related error, because it is not apparent without special efforts to detect it, there is no doubt that a lack of standardization among interviewers is responsible for a great deal of survey data being less good than it should be. Moreover, in contrast to some strategies for reducing error in surveys, such as increasing sample sizes, the cost of strategies for reducing interviewer-related error are often surprisingly low. On that note, let us turn to what we know about how to minimize interviewer-related error in surveys.

3

Standardized Interviewing Techniques

Although it is not at all easy to carry out a good, standardized survey in which all interviewers behave consistently, the procedures for interviewers to follow in handling the question-and-answer process in a standardized way are simply stated:

1. Read the questions exactly as worded.
2. If the respondent's answer to the initial question is not a complete and adequate answer, probe for clarification and elaboration in a nondirective way; that is, in a way that does not influence the content of the answers that result.
3. Answers should be recorded without interviewer discretion; the answers recorded should reflect what the respondent says, and they should only reflect what the respondent says.
4. The interviewer communicates a neutral, nonjudgemental stance with respect to the substance of answers. The interviewer should not provide any personal information that might imply any particular values or preferences with respect to topics to be covered in the interview, nor should the interviewer provide any feedback to respondents, positive or negative, with respect to the specific content of the answers they provide.

There are, however, two main obstacles to actually carrying out an interview in a standardized way:

1. An inadequate survey instrument. If the questionnaire is not designed so that it can be administered easily in a standardized way, then it is unlikely that standardized procedures will be followed. This is a subject we will say more about in Chapter 5.
2. Respondents do not understand what is expected of them. The measurement process in a survey interview is a team effort, requiring both participants to play their roles as prescribed. A major reason interviewers have difficulty in performing their job properly is that they are unable or do not know how to train the respondent to make the interview process work. That topic is addressed later in this chapter.

There are two other factors that increase the likelihood that interviewers will not do a good job of being standardized interviewers, particularly if they are having trouble with the questionnaire or the respondent:

1. Interviewers generally want answers to be accurate, so they have trouble being standardized when the goals of standardization and accuracy seem to be in conflict.
2. Interviewers like to be personable and responsive to respondents, and they sometimes have trouble being standardized when they feel a conflict between behaving as they are trained and maintaining the kind of relationship they think the respondent wants.

The goal of standardization does not have to conflict with obtaining accurate data or being responsive to the respondent. The last part of this chapter deals with strategies for achieving standardized interviewing without neglecting those other important goals. Table 3.1 provides a summary of the techniques for standardized interviewing and its impediments.

READING QUESTIONS AS WORDED

Virtually every interviewer's manual that we have examined has "reading the questions the way they are written" as a basic first principle of good interviewing technique. On the surface, it would appear to be a rule that is both easy to understand and easy to follow. Hence, it may be somewhat surprising to learn that interviewers often do not read questions the way they are written.

In four studies in which interviewer-respondent interactions were coded, the rates at which interviewers changed question wording ranged from 20 to 40 percent. (Bradburn & Sudman, 1979; Cannell, Fowler & Marquis, 1968; Fowler & Mangione, 1986; Cannell and Oksenberg, 1988.) Moreover, it is important to know that these studies were all done in organizations that put more than the average emphasis on methodological rigor. These numbers are probably conservative with respect to the rates at which interviewers actually change question wording.

Why do interviewers change wording? Certainly in some cases the person who wrote the questions bears major responsibility. Interviewers are likely to change wording if a question is hard to read. They also will change a question to provide an emphasis that they think will make it easier for the respondent to grasp the question or what is wanted. Such explanations, however, can only account for a portion of interviewer lapses. In our opinion, the major force pushing interviewers to change question wording is an effort to make the interaction somewhat more conversational and casual. One way they do that is to add their personal touches to the questions. This practice is likely to continue and grow over an interviewer's career unless

Table 3.1
Standardized Interviewing and Its Impediments

Techniques for Standardized Interviewing
1. Read questions as written.
2. Probe inadequate answers nondirectively.
3. Record answers without discretion.
4. Be interpersonally nonjudgemental regarding substance of answers.

Obstacles to Standardized Interviewing
1. Inadequate survey instrument.
2. Respondents who do not know how to play their role.

Reasons Interviewers Fail to be Standardized
1. Goal of accuracy seems to conflict with goal of standardization.
2. Goal of maintaining rapport appears to conflict with goal of standardization.

supervisory practices involve monitoring and feedback when interviewers do not read questions exactly as worded. Bradburn and Sudman (1979) found that more experienced interviewers were more casual about the way they read questions than were comparatively new interviewers.

Of course, most of the changes in wording appear to be minor; certainly most interviewers would say they are *basically* reading the questions the way they are written. The critical issue from the point of view of measurement is whether or not the question wording changes that occur make any difference to the quality of measurement. The answer is, we do not know for sure, although we do know that small differences in the way questions are worded can have a major impact on answers.

One way we looked at this was to see whether questions that were mos likely to be misread by interviewers were distinctively likely to have larg interviewer effects, as measured by the intraclass correlation. Our findin was negative in this respect. When interviewers are given a hard questio to read, the changes that they make do not generally produce significat interviewer-related effects on the data.

A second approach was to see whether interviewers who were distin tively casual about question reading seemed to produce distinctively biase data. Our assessment is restricted to 20 interviewers who tape recorded the interviews, which were then coded. Since each interviewer's sample w a probability subsample of the total, it was meaningful to look at wheth the estimates derived from an interviewer's subsample differed from t sample as a whole. We simply counted the number of estimates from ea interviewer's sample which we thought were potentially biased; that is, t fell in the biased direction compared to the total sample mean. That co

was correlated with various ratings of an interviewer's performance with respect to standardized interviewing skills.

It was found that the ratings of various skills, including reading questions, probing, and recording answers, were intercorrelated, so we cannot pull out the distinctive contribution of good question reading from good probing. With only 20 interviewers involved, the raw correlations did not reach statistical significance, but the direction of association for all of these standardized behaviors, including reading questions, is in the expected direction; that is, interviewers who were rated as showing better interviewing skills, including reading questions, appear to obtain less biased data.

The third approach to answering that question is to look at studies of question wording. Schuman and Presser (1981) report a number of experiments in which small changes in question wording were made on purpose, with the results being compared. Basically, they find that sometimes small changes in wording make a big difference in the distribution of answers; in other cases, apparently large changes in question wording have minimal effect on the answers people give.

Question A: Should Communists be forbidden to speak in public places in the United States?

Question B: Should Communists be allowed to speak in public places in the United States?

It could be argued "forbidden" and "not allowed" are equivalent concepts, but to respondents they are not. For example, when comparable samples were asked the two forms of the question, nearly 50 percent said the U.S. should "not allow" Communists to speak in public, while only about 20 percent said the U.S. should "forbid them to speak." This finding suggests that if an interviewer chose to substitute "forbid" for "not allow" in a question, it would have a marked impact on the data, and would produce clear interviewer-related error. Such a change might seem innocuous and conversational to an interviewer, making the question better, if you will, but it would be an excellent example of why we tell interviewers to read questions as worded.

Interviewers also are instructed carefully to read all the alternatives. It might be tempting to add or delete an alternative that says "or do you have no opinion on that topic." Again Schuman and Presser give us a good example that the alternatives matter. Comparable samples were asked whether they favored or opposed a fictitious Agricultural Trade Act of 1978. One sample was explicitly offered the option, "or do you have no opinion on that"; the other sample was offered no such option; it was asked only if

it favored or opposed the act. The result: 69% of the sample volunteered that they did not know the answer, but 90% chose the "no opinion" option when it was offered.

Whether or not a "no opinion" category is included has a major effect on the distribution of answers. Not reading one category might seem to be a small change that would make a question easier to read, but it produces interviewer-related error.

On the other hand, Schuman and Presser report other experiments where major changes in wording seem to have little effect on answers. For example, substituting the term "abortion" for the term "end a pregnancy" had no effect on answers that people gave.

In conclusion then, the theoretical argument for having interviewers ask questions exactly the way they are written is easy to understand. If the interviewer does not ask questions the way they are written, the researcher does not know for sure what question was posed. However, general instructions to interviewers not to change wording do not suffice. Interviewers do reword questions unless significant efforts are made to keep them from doing it. Moreover, they are likely to increase the practice over time unless that tendency is checked. The motivations for interviewers rewording questions are generally innocuous, or even constructive, trying to make questions clearer, trying to make the interaction with the respondent go more smoothly, in short trying to improve on the work of the researcher. Sometimes the effects of those efforts are innocuous, but sometimes they create substantial differences. Basically, it takes effort and work on the part of the researcher to write questions that can be asked as worded, but it is an effort that must be made if serious measurement is to be achieved.

PROBING INADEQUATE ANSWERS

In an ideal situation, the researcher writes a great question, the interviewer reads it as written, and the respondent provides a complete answer which meets the question objectives. Of course, that does not always happen. If the initial reading of the question does not produce a satisfactory answer, then the interviewer must engage in some kind of behavior to move the process along and reach the desired end point. The interviewer's behavior cannot be completely preprogrammed, because the problem to be solved will vary from situation to situation. However, the goal is to have interviewers handle the problem in a way that is consistent across interviewers and respondents and that does not influence the content of the answers that

result. This behavior, which actually involves several steps, is called nondirective probing.

Actually there are two kinds of problems that interviewers have to solve. First, they sometimes have to clarify the meaning of questions for respondents. Second, they have to stimulate respondents to amplify, clarify, or in some other way modify their original answer to be complete and meet question objectives.

In principle, dealing with the clarification problems should be simple. Most often if a respondent does not understand a question immediately, it merely means the respondent was not attending to some aspect of the question. The interviewer's response is to reread the question in its entirety, emphasizing the words or part of the question that the respondent missed the first time. Although occasionally introductory phrases or sections may be omitted from the second reading, the interviewer should be sure to read the whole question so that the respondent indeed has the same stimulus as all the other respondents when preparing an answer.

In some cases, of course, the problem lies not in the fact that the respondent failed to listen to the question, but that some term or concept in the question had an ambiguous meaning to the respondent. In that case, in our opinion, there is no basis for interviewer discretion. If the term is defined in the question, the interviewer can reread the definition. If the term is not defined in the question, then the respondent must answer the question using whatever interpretation of the term seems best to the respondent.

We know researchers who propose to write definitions of possibly ambiguous terms in training manuals so interviewers can use them when they are asked. We have no hesitation in saying that is a totally inadequate solution to the problem. First, interviewers are not going to open training manuals in the middle of an interview in order to get the exact wording provided by the investigator. Interviewers may attempt to reproduce the definition in the manual from memory, but they will do so inconsistently across respondents and interviewers, producing an unstandardized stimulus. Worst of all, only those respondents who ask or display overt confusion will be exposed to this special definition, while others (including some who are equally confused) will not have the benefit of the definition.

It is absolutely frustrating to respondents and interviewers to have to work with a question where an obviously critical term, that could have more than one meaning, is not well defined. When a respondent asks whether or not visits to psychiatrists count as visits to medical doctors, the response of "whatever you think" may seem to be a ridiculous answer. However, the time to solve the problem is before the data collection begins, not dur-

ing an interview. The person to solve the problem is the researcher, not the interviewer. Once the data collection has begun, the best measurement will be accomplished if the interviewers consistently present the questions they are given in a standardized way, ill-defined concepts and all.

The other part of the probing task is to obtain answers that meet question objectives. The interviewer activity will depend to some extent on what the task is for the respondent. The respondent task can usefully be categorized into three classes: choosing one of a set of alternative answers provided as part of the question (referred to as a closed-ended question), providing a numerical answer, and providing an answer in the respondent's own words (typically referred to as an open-ended question).

Probing Closed Questions

When a question calls for a respondent to choose an answer from a list, and the respondent has not done so, the interviewer's job is to explain to the respondent that choosing one answer from the list is the way to answer the question (called training the respondent) and to read the list of responses again.

There are two kinds of mistakes that interviewers can make in handling such a situation. First, interviewers can accept an answer that does not exactly fit one of the responses and themselves code the answer into a response category. In short, the interviewer can pick the answer instead of having the respondent do it.

The way this happens is easy to understand.

Interviewer: How would you rate your schools—very good, good, fair, or poor?
Respondent: The schools around here are not very good.

At that point, one can understand why an interviewer might check a box and go on. The problem, of course, is that some interviewers might check the "fair" box and others might check the "poor" box. If the interviewer takes the respondent's words and then does some adjusting to produce an answer, the potential for inconsistency across interviewers is great. When the respondent chooses an answer, it does not guarantee zero error, but it should make the answer dependent only on the respondent and unrelated to the interviewer. This is what standardization is trying to achieve.

The other mistake an interviewer can make in probing a closed-ended question is not to repeat all the alternatives when the alternatives need to be repeated. In the case above, where the respondent said "not very good,"

it would be understandable if the interviewer probed something like: "Well, would you say fair or poor?" That is bad practice that will affect the answers. It can be shown that the distribution of answers to a scale that has "good, fair, poor" versus one that has "very good, good, fair, poor" is quite different. Respondents respond to the number of categories and the position of a category on a scale, as well as to the words, when classifying themselves. A truncated version of a set of responses is not the same stimulus, and it will affect the answers.

Probing Numerical Answers

When an answer calls for a numerical response, not in categories, the most common problem faced by the interviewer is one of precision. A respondent may answer with a range or a rounded number, and the interviewer may want to attempt to get the respondent to answer more precisely.

One inappropriate behavior is a directive probe. A directive probe is one that increases the likelihood of one answer over others. There are many different ways that interviewers can create directive probes, but the easy way to recognize one is that it can be answered with a "yes" or "no" response. The reason such probes are called directive is that in essence they suggest a particular answer as a possibility. Respondents are more likely to say "yes" than "no" when asked a question like that. So, *any probe that can be answered with a "yes" or "no" is directive.* In addition, any probe that lists or mentions some possible answers, but excludes others, is also directive because it increases the likelihood that the mentioned answers will be chosen.

Questions that call for numerical answers often require interviewers to probe for more specific details, and they are amenable to directive probing.

QUESTION: In the last seven nights, how many times have you gotten fewer than eight hours of sleep?

RESPONSE: I usually get eight hours of sleep.

DIRECTIVE PROBE 1: Well, for the last seven nights, would the answer be 0?

DIRECTIVE PROBE 2: Well, for the last seven nights, would the best answer be 0, 1,or 2?

NONDIRECTIVE PROBE 1: In the last seven nights, how many times have you gotten fewer than eight hours of sleep?

NONDIRECTIVE PROBE 2: Well, for the last week, would the best answer be more than 2 times or 2 or fewer times?

FOLLOW-UP NONDIRECTIVE PROBE 2: (If answer is "fewer") Well, for the past seven days, would the best answer be 0, 1 or 2?

The problem with the first two probes, obviously, is that they suggest an answer. The first is the worst, as it is clearly a probe that can be answered with a "yes" or "no.' The second probe is less blatant, but the interviewer has already pretty well narrowed the field for the respondent. It would take an act of initiative, which respondents often do not do, to give an answer that is different from 0, 1, or 2.

In this case, the very best probe is to repeat the question, since the real problem with the respondent's answer was that the question was not answered. Repeating the question has the distinct advantage of being the most standardized approach also, since it involves no innovation or question creation on the part of the interviewer.

Nondirective Probe #2 is an acceptable response from the point of view of being nondirective, although it is less standardized. In this case, the interviewer is using a technique called "zeroing in." A reasonable guess is made by the interviewer of the general area in which the answer is likely to be found, and then a question is asked which does not suggest an interviewer expectation that the answer will fall on one or the other side of the cutpoint. Once an answer is obtained to the initial question, follow-up questions can be asked to further narrow the range.

Sometimes "zeroing in" is the only way, or the most efficient way, to get respondents to be more precise in their answers. Our own preference, however, is to explain the value of having the respondent, rather than the interviewer or the researcher, make an estimate about where in a range the accurate answer falls, and then to let the respondent, armed with a clarification of his or her role, answer the question as originally posed. In short, as usual, our strategy is to train the respondent and stick with the question as written.

Probing Open-Ended Questions

The hardest probing tasks for interviewers involve those connected with open-ended questions. The interviewer has to make three judgments of any answer that is obtained: Does it answer the question? Is the answer clear? Is the answer complete?

In reviewing manuals for interviewers, we found that there is much greater variation among organizations in their instructions to interviewers about probing than there is about reading questions as worded. Some organizations seem to accept, or even encourage, interviewers to find a variety of conversational ways to get respondents to clarify or elaborate their answers. Our preference is to have interviewers stick with a very small list of probes.

In fact, we train interviewers that in addition to repeating the question, they only need to use three probes:

1. How do you mean that?
2. Tell me more about that.
3. Anything else?

These three probes are easy to remember. They are nondirective. They do not give interviewers any opportunity to innovate in ways that would make their interviews different across respondents or interviewers. Our feeling is that to the extent that organizations encourage innovative probing, any gains that may be realized in variety or conversational interest will be lost in lack of standardization. Moreover, if the creative probes are truly nondirective, they probably amount to one of the three mentioned above.

The interviewer's task is to decide which of those probes is appropriate, and that involves analyzing the respondent's answer. The four probes, including repeating the question, correspond to the four ways in which a respondent's answer can be inadequate:

1. The response can fail to answer the question; it answers some other question. The interviewer should repeat the question.
2. The answer contains unclear concepts or terms that make its meaning ambiguous. The interviewer should probe saying, "How do you mean (that)?"
3. The answer is not detailed enough or specific enough. The interviewer should probe saying, "Could you tell me more about (that)?"
4. A perfectly appropriate answer has been given, but there is a possibility that there are additional points that the respondent could make in answer to the question. The interviewer should ask, "Is there anything else?."

Below are some examples of situations in which these probes would be used.

QUESTION: From your point of view, what are the best things about living in this neighborhood?

COMMENT: This is one of the hardest kinds of questions for interviewers and respondents to deal with, because the kinds of "things" that count are not specified at all. It is up to the respondent and interviewer to decide what sorts of neighborhood features can appropriately be mentioned, and in how much detail.

ANSWER 1: In the last neighborhood in which we lived, it was very transient. People didn't care about keeping up the neighborhood.

COMMENT: The problem with this answer is that it does not answer the question. Although by inference the description of the old neighborhood may be implying something about the characteristics of the present neighborhood, the question asks for a description of the current neighborhood.

PROBE: Repeat the question.

ANSWER 2: The people.

COMMENT: This plausibly could be an answer to this question, but no one could figure out what it means. We need some elaboration.

PROBE: Tell me more about that.

ANSWER 3: The people are good neighbors.

COMMENT: Someone might think that was an adequate answer. It is very hard to tell. One of the problems with this question, as noted, is that it does not give a clue to the interviewer or respondent what kind of answer would satisfy the researcher. Whether or not this is a specific enough answer depends on the question objectives and coding procedures. Nonetheless, what constitutes a "good neighbor" could clearly differ from respondent to respondent, and there is not any information in the answer so far on that topic. A good interviewer would probably probe to find out more about what the respondent meant.

PROBE: How do you mean good neighbor?

ANSWER 4: They keep to themselves. They leave you alone. You don't have to worry about being sociable and you don't have to worry about what they think.

COMMENT: This surprise answer shows the value of probing. Based on the initial answer, some might have expected the "good neighbor" answer was going to lead to a description of how warm, friendly, and helpful everyone in the neighborhood was. We now understand what the respondent means by people and good neighbors. The question, however, calls potentially for the respondent to mention more than one "thing" about the neighborhood.

PROBE: Okay, I have that down. Anything else?

COMMENT: With a question that allows the respondent to make an unlimited number of points, an interviewer should continue to ask "Anything else?," until the respondent says "no."

Probing Don't Know Answers

When the respondent answers a question by saying "I don't know," it poses a special probing problem to interviewers. "I don't know" can be a legitimate answer to a knowledge question. It also can mean:

A. It is a respondent response style, a kind of preface to the answer while he or she is thinking about it.
B. The respondent has not thought about the question before, but if he or she thinks about it, an answer may be forthcoming.

C. The respondent knows an answer, but is not sure it is specific or accurate enough for the standards of the researcher.

When a respondent says "don't know," the interviewer's first task is to attempt to diagnose the origin of the problem.

A. If "I don't know" is considered to be an accurate, thoughtful answer to an information question, the interviewer writes down the answer and goes to the next question.

B. If it is a delaying response style, the interviewer gives the respondent time to think about the answer. The interviewer may want to repeat the question to help the respondent think it through.

C. If the respondent has not thought about the question, the interviewer would encourage the respondent to think about the question, emphasizing that the respondent is uniquely qualified to provide information on the topic. Then repeat the question.

D. If the respondent is not sure about the quality or precision of the answer, the interviewer should be reassuring. There are no right or wrong answers; the questions are designed to get people's own perceptions and opinions. The respondent's own best estimate will be better than not having any information at all. Then the interviewer would repeat the question.

Types of Probing Errors

Probing is certainly the hardest of the interviewer skills to learn. Interviewers make two main types of probing errors: probing directively and failing to probe an answer that requires probing.

Initially, researchers were concerned that interviewers would probe directively in order to make results come out the way they wanted them to be. So, for example, they thought that Republican interviewers would probe in ways that would increase the number of answers supporting Republican views. When interviewers are reasonably well trained, that sort of thing does not seem to happen (e.g., Hyman et al., 1954). Mainly, interviewers seem to probe directively when they think they know the answer the respondent wants to give and are having trouble getting the respondent to be explicit.

Directive probing is a strategy for easing the interviewer-respondent interaction. Interviewers find it stressful when they probe an answer several times and still cannot get the respondent to give an answer that meets the question objectives. When the respondent has said enough that both the interviewer and the respondent are fairly sure that the interviewer knows the answer, the easiest thing for the interviewer to do is to say, "I think you want to answer X; is that right?"

The other kind of error interviewers make is *failure to probe* answers that need to be probed or being inconsistent in choosing which answers they do and do not probe. Three kinds of situations have been found to be particularly prone to interviewer variation in probing.

First, Hyman et al. (1954) found that interviewer expectations affected their probing behavior. Specifically, when they obtained an answer that was consistent with what they expected, based on what they knew about the respondent and other answers given, interviewers tended to accept it without further probing. However, when respondents gave an answer that appeared to interviewers to be inconsistent, they were likely to probe it to make sure they had it right. This is an example of conscientious interviewer behavior that results in handling answers inconsistently.

Interviewers also are likely to be different in the number of answers that they get to questions for which multiple answers are possible. There is interviewer discretion in how often they ask for "anything else?" Some interviewers obtain more answers than others on a consistent basis because they consistently probe for more answers, and that affects the data.

Third, interviewers have been found consistently to differ in the way they handle the "don't know" response or its equivalent. Some interviewers either work harder or are more successful in getting opinions or answers out of respondents when they say initially that they do not have an answer to the question.

Probing is one part of the question-and-answer process that cannot be completely standardized; if a respondent does not give an adequate answer when the question is first asked, the interviewer has some decisions to make. The response cannot be perfectly programmed. Anytime there is an opportunity for interviewer discretion, there is an opportunity for interviewers to be inconsistent across respondents and across interviewers, and that is when interviewer-related error occurs.

Is probing an important source of error in survey measurement? Absolutely. In Hyman's early studies, differences in probing were the main error-producing aspects of interviewer behavior. The two problems cited above, the way "don't know" answers are handled and the number of mentions obtained from respondents, are both characteristics of questions that have been consistently associated with interviewer effects (Groves and Magilavy, 1980). In our own studies, the quality of open-ended probing was related to the bias in answers interviewers obtained at a nearly significant level ($p = .07$). Moreover, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, the most important correlate of questions which are prone to interviewer effects is the likelihood that they will require interviewer probing.

As we will argue in Chapter 5, we think the most effective way to try

to minimize probing as a factor in interviewer-related error is to improve the quality of questions. The less interviewers have to probe, the less opportunity they will have to make errors. In addition, we are strong believers in minimizing the variety of probes that interviewers use. The more interviewers use innovation in creating the stimuli to which respondents respond, the more likely they are to be inconsistent and create error. Moreover, interviewers have plenty to do during an interview besides thinking up innovative probes. A good question will not only minimize the need for probing but will also reduce the inconsistency of probes when they are needed.

RECORDING ANSWERS

The job of the interviewer is to write down the answer the respondent gives. The key to standardized recording is to have no interviewer judgment, no interviewer summaries, no interviewer effects on what is written down. The rules for standardized recording differ for closed and open-ended questions, and by whether the question asks for the report of factual information or information about opinions and feelings. (See Table 3.2.)

For closed-response questions, the key interviewer task is to get the respondent to choose one answer and then to check or record the answer chosen. The only possible recording error, other than a clerical error, would be for an interviewer to indicate that a response was chosen by the respondent when in fact it was not.

The rule for recording open-ended responses to opinion or attitude questions is equally clear and simple: interviewers should write down the answer verbatim; that is, the interviewer should write down the exact words given by the respondent, without summary or omissions. It has been documented that summaries and paraphrases will vary from interviewer to interviewer (e.g., Hyman et al., 1954). One way to keep interviewers from affecting answers is to reduce interviewer discretion about what to record.

When questions are of a factual nature, whether answers are of the closed-response or open-ended variety, the rules are a little bit different. While the coding of subjective answers is highly dependent on the way things are phrased and the particular points that are or are not made, factual questions generally ask for some specific kind of information. The words that a respondent uses are not deemed critical. The interviewer is expected to write down the information provided by the respondent that was called for in the question, without trying to record the exact words. Moreover, if the question includes a set of response alternatives, and the respondent does

Table 3.2
Guidelines for Recording Answers for Different Types of Questions

Open-ended, factual questions
Write down all information relevant to the question's objectives.

Open-ended, opinion questions
Write down the answer verbatim; use no paraphrasing or summaries.

Closed-ended, factual questions
Check-off the answer chosen by the respondent.

If the respondent is not certain which category fits, treat the question as an open question and record all relevant information. The final decision about how to treat the answer should be made during the coding operation.

Closed-ended, opinion questions
Check-off the answer chosen by the respondent.

Probe until the respondent chooses an answer.

Do not check-off an answer category unless the respondent chooses it.

not choose one, the best step probably is for the interviewer to write down the relevant information provided by the respondent without necessarily getting the respondent to choose a single category.

One of the important realities about asking factual questions is that sometimes it is hard to anticipate all the possible special circumstances that will be encountered. Moreover, respondents may come up with questions or problems with definitions that are not given in the question but nonetheless are essential to giving an accurate answer. It is not good practice for an interviewer to provide a definition or to give help to one respondent that is not going to be given consistently to others. It is intolerable for an interviewer to make up an idiosyncratic rule about how to handle a special situation that was not anticipated. For a factual question, good practice is to gather all the information needed to answer the question given alternative interpretations of key concepts that effect the answer. Then the researcher can make a consistent coding rule across all respondents.

In an earlier example, we discussed a question about visits to medical doctors. One respondent wanted to know whether a visit to a doctor's office counted when only a nurse was seen for inoculations. If the respondent or interviewer cannot tell from the question what the rule must be, the ideal solution would be to write down all the information needed given either interpretation. Hence, the interviewer might write down: "Four con-

tacts with medical doctor plus a series of ten visits when inoculations were given by a nurse only."

Another common recording challenge is exemplified by questions about how much formal education has been completed. Many educative post-high school experiences do not fall neatly on the typical educational ladder. Suppose the following categories are offered: less than high school graduate, high school graduate, some college, and college graduate. Respondents will report post-high school education in art, music, nursing, auto mechanics, and many other things. It is not feasible to give interviewers (and thereby respondents) rules for which of these do and do not count as college experience. The thing to do is have interviewers write down the exact pattern of education that the respondent has had, then let the coding department handle these problems consistently across all interviewers and respondents.

So for factual questions, the threat to standardized measurement is that interviewers will make arbitrary decisions. Verbatim recording is not that important, but getting all the information down so that the decision rules can be carefully evaluated and applied consistently is the critical step in standardized measurement for such questions.

Our studies of interviewers suggest that they make relatively few errors in recording closed-response answers. The quality of verbatim recording of open-ended opinion questions varies more. It takes interviewer effort to do that well, and interviewers will not do it unless their supervisors insist on it. It is important, though, because interviewer summaries and paraphrases are not standardized. As noted, Hyman et al. (1954) found that interviewer expectations affected what they wrote down. Interviewers tended to make their recorded answers consistent with their perceptions of the respondent; their paraphrases and summaries left out the contradictions and subtleties in answers.

BEING INTERPERSONALLY NEUTRAL

All interviewer manuals encourage interviewers to be interpersonally neutral as part of the standardization process. Sometimes it is difficult to figure out exactly what is meant by that, but we think the proposed behavior includes, if it is not limited to, the following:

1. The interviewer would not volunteer personal information to the respondent about life situations, views, or values. That would be particularly true for any characteristics that might be related to the subject matter of the interview, but most survey organizations want to minimize such conversation

altogether for at least three reasons. First, volunteering personal information may undermine the goal of establishing a professional, rather than a personal, relationship in which data gathering is the priority. Second, although interviewers cannot be identical in their observable demographic characteristics, talking about personal situations and views only exacerbates the differences across interviewers. Third, information about personal views and background may directly affect answers. The most serious way would be that a respondent would try to guess which answers would be most valued or preferred by interviewers.

2. During the interview interaction, the interviewer should be careful that the feedback provided to respondents does not imply any evaluation or judgment about the content of the respondent's answers. The goal of the interviewer is to get accurate and complete answers. It is natural for respondents to be concerned about how answers will look to the interviewer. The interviewer should be careful not to feed into that process by casual interpersonal behavior.

This aspect of standardized interviewing is something at which interviewers are pretty good if they have at least a little bit of training. Untrained interviewers are not good at it. In our studies, over a third of interviewers with minimal training were rated in need of improvement in the interpersonal area, but over 85 percent of interviews done by interviewers with more than minimal training were judged to be "satisfactory" or better in managing the interpersonal side of things. (See Chapter 7).

These data are consistent with Hyman's studies. He was concerned that interviewers' personal views would be communicated to respondents. He found that respondents usually reported they had no idea about interviewers' opinions. When they did think they knew where interviewers stood, those opinions often were not accurate. Significantly, when respondents thought they knew the interviewer's opinion, they almost always thought interviewers agreed with their views regardless of the interviewer's actual opinions.

In our observations of interview interactions, blatant evaluative comments are quite rare. In training, we tell stories about the interviewer who asked the respondent how much he drinks. When he says he has six drinks a day, the interviewer responds, "Oh my gosh, that's awful." Such events really do not happen in a reasonably well run survey.

What is harder to deal with are the subtle kinds of feedback processes. For instance, a respondent says, "I haven't had to go to the doctor in over a year now. I guess I have been pretty lucky." To that an interviewer might respond, "Isn't that great."

Now what's so bad about that? Don't we all share a general humanitarian wish for universal good health? Sure. However, we do not want that respondent to get the idea that this interviewer will think less of him/her or be unhappy or somehow care if, when the next question comes along, some

deviation from perfect health has to be reported. In this instant relationship in which respondents are looking for clues about how to do it right, subtle, seemingly innocent expressions of pleasure that a respondent is healthy or has taken good care of his/her health can lead to effects on the data.

How important is it? It is hard to say for sure. However, Marquis, Cannell and Laurent (1972) found clear evidence that subtle reinforcement of respondent behavior had a significant effect on the number of health conditions and visits to doctors reported. Moreover, in our studies, among tape recorded interviewers, there was a significant relationship between the rating of inappropriate feedback to respondents and the likelihood that interviewers obtained answers that appeared to be biased.

Thus, the evidence is that interviewers can be successful at avoiding blatantly biasing evaluative behavior; most reasonably well run surveys will not have that problem. On the other hand, there is a considerable amount of more subtle interaction that goes on between interviewers and respondents that probably affects some answers.

TRAINING THE RESPONDENT

In our studies, we have come to believe that one of the most important things an interviewer can do to carry out a standardized interview is to train the respondent. Although a main source of problems for interviewers can be a poorly constructed survey instrument, the real problem comes when the interviewer begins to feel awkward because of the way the interview is proceeding and the rules under which the participants are operating. One reaction of interviewers is to bend the rules of standardization in order to appear to be responsive to the respondent and to make the respondent more comfortable. We say a better solution is to explain what is going on to the respondent, the reasons why it is necessary to do the interview in a standardized rather than a nonstandardized way. We are convinced that if interviewers will do this consistently, the quality of the measurement will improve markedly.

There are two basic approaches to training respondents. One is to provide an introductory briefing at the beginning of the interview. The second is to explain specific features of a standardized interview as the issues arise during the course of the interview. Practically speaking, a combination is probably best.

We strongly advocate having interviewers read a paragraph such as the following before the interview starts:

> Since many people have never been in an interview exactly like this, let me read you a paragraph that tells a little bit about how it works. I am going to read you a set of questions exactly as they are worded so that every respondent in the survey is answering the same questions. You'll be asked to answer two kinds of questions. In some cases, you'll be asked to answer in your own words. For those questions, I will have to write down your answers word for word. In other cases, you will be given a list of answers and asked to choose the one that fits best. If at any time during the interview you are not clear about what is wanted, be sure to ask me.

This brief introduction accomplishes several very important things that make the job easier for the interviewer. First, it introduces the fact that this is a specialized interaction with a special set of rules. It is not like most other interactions the respondent has been in, including other interviews. It also legitimizes the notion that the interviewer may elaborate or explain further rules as this game progresses.

Second, it tells the respondent in advance what the interviewer is going to do, which will make it easier to do it. Also, once an interviewer has told a respondent that questions will be read exactly as worded, it will make it harder for the interviewer not to do it; it may increase standardization for that reason as well.

Once the interview begins, we believe an interviewer should stop the question-and-answer process every time the respondent fails to perform his or her role appropriately and explain the rules and why the rules matter. The following are among the most common issues:

PROBLEM: The respondent has partially answered, or even fully answered, a question that has not yet been asked. The interviewer feels awkward about reading the next question, since it will appear that the respondent's earlier answer was not heard.

INTERVIEWER: "The next question is one you have already dealt with to some extent. However, the way the interview works is that I need to have you answer each question specifically, so that we can compare the answers you give with the answers everyone else gives. Also, sometimes we find the answer is different to a specific question, even though it seems that the question has been answered before. So, let me read the question as it is worded here, and I would like you to give me the answer to make sure we have it right."

PROBLEM: A question contains a term that the respondent finds ambiguous or not well defined, and the question wording does not provide what the respondent considers to be an adequate definition.

INTERVIEWER: "I see what your problem is with the question. Even though these questions are carefully tested, sometimes we have one that is not quite

clear to some people, or which doesn't quite fit everybody's situation. Again, though, the way a survey works, we need people's best answers to the questions as they are written. That way we can compare your answers with other people's. If we change the question for each respondent, we wouldn't be able to analyze the answers. Let me read the question again, and you give me the best, most accurate answer you can, given the way it is written."

PROBLEM: Respondent does not want to choose one of the response alternatives in a closed-ended question.

INTERVIEWER: "With this kind of question, answers are analyzed according to which of these alternatives people choose. I need to have you choose one of these specific answers so that we can compare your response with those that others give. We know that in some cases none of the answers will fit the way you feel exactly; but other people will have that problem, too. The important thing is that we keep the question-and-answer process consistent across everybody, so we can see similarities and differences in the answers people give."

PROBLEM: Respondent will not give an answer that is specific enough, because it would only be an estimate or a guess.

INTERVIEWER: "Well we would like it if you would make your very best estimate. Even though it may not be exactly right, no one is in a better position than you are to make this estimate. Just do the best you can."

PROBLEM: Respondent is speaking too fast, and the interviewer is having trouble recording verbatim.

INTERVIEWER: "I have to write down your answer exactly as you give it, so that it is accurate. If I summarize, I might not get it right. For questions like this, it would help if you would speak slowly, and I may ask you to repeat some parts so that I can get it all down without making a mistake or leaving anything out.

PROBLEM: A family member wants to help a respondent form the answer to an opinion question.

INTERVIEWER: "On factual questions, things like how many times you've seen a doctor or been in the hospital, it is fine for you to get help from anyone who can be helpful, because we want the most accurate information we can get. However, when we ask for somebody's feelings or opinions, there really is no one except you who can give us that answer. Again, it is a matter of being consistent across everybody. When we are asking how somebody feels or what they think, that person alone has to give us the answer that seems to fit best. Although lots of us know others very well, we don't think that anyone else can accurately tell us what someone thinks or feels. Therefore, to be consistent, we make sure that people answer those kinds of questions for themselves.

PROBLEM: The respondent asks the interviewer for an opinion during the interview.

INTERVIEWER: "I'll talk about anything you want after the interview, but not before it is over. The reason is that we have found that in some cases when interviewers give their opinions and ideas during an interview, we influence the answers we get. This whole interview process is set up so that the only thing that influences the answers is your situation and what you have to say."

We could extend this list. The details are not important. What is important is the process. If an interviewer is trying to conduct a standardized interview and the respondent does not know how to play the role, the result will be an awkward interaction in which the interviewer will frequently be forced to choose between standardization and being responsive to the respondent. It is true that in order to train the respondent effectively, the interviewer has to be well informed; the interviewer has to know the rules and have a reasonable idea of the reasons for them. However, that level of knowledge is not difficult to achieve. Most interviewers receive these explanations in the course of their training. The trick is to make sure they use them in the right way during the interview process.

CONCLUSION

Carrying out an interview in a standardized way is a difficult task. From the point of view of skills, there is no doubt that probing is the hardest thing for interviewers to do in a consistent, nondirective way. It is the area in which interviewers are most likely to fall short of reasonable standards, and also the area from which interviewer effects are most likely to emanate. Recording open-ended answers to opinion questions is also very hard to do well, and also is a source of error, though the decline of the use of open-ended questions in standardized surveys makes that somewhat less of a problem than in the past.

Interviewers also do not read questions as worded; they like to make changes in questions. As a source of error in surveys, reading errors probably are less important than probing errors. However, the rates at which interviewers have been found to be writing their own questions in published studies does not make one sanguine about that aspect of standardization. Moreover, it is likely that in more casually operated surveys, the rates at which interviewers are changing question wording are even more severe,

with more severe consequences, than those reported in the literature. Although it is hard to document the exact extent of that, it may be worth repeating that the bedrock of standardized measurement is that we know what questions people are being asked.

Being neutral is something that interviewers seem to understand and take to readily. Again, the perspective in this book may be slanted by the fact that people who study interviewers tend to work with well organized interviewing staffs where clear standards are emphasized. The ease with which interviewers can slip into interpersonal behavior that implies judgment and evaluation leads one to suspect that this, too, may be more of a problem than is reflected in published data.

Finally, one of the most important contributions we have to make to improving the standardization of interviewing is to emphasize the importance of training the respondent. Based on our observations, a main reason for a breakdown in standardization is that respondents fail to cooperate or fail to understand the process. Consider the task of trying to play chess with someone who thought he or she was playing a slight variation on checkers. There would be a general idea about what was supposed to happen, but confusion about the detailed rules would make it an extremely frustrating experience. In a way, survey respondents are in a similar situation. They have a general idea about interviews, but they do not have a clear understanding about how a specific standardized interview should work. Telling them that the rules are different, and then briefing them on the details of the rules as they become relevant in the course of the game, only makes sense, and it makes for a much better game.