

# Interviewing, Structured, Unstructured, and Postmodern

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Interviewing is a methodology based on asking questions in order to gain information from the respondent. The interview may be structured, unstructured, and postmodern. Structured interview seeks information with an emphasis on measurement, unstructured interview stresses understanding the world of the respondent, and postmodern interview focuses on the negotiated interaction between interviewer and respondent.

## DEVELOPMENT

Interviewing first became popular in clinical diagnosing and in counseling; later, it was used in psychological testing. Charles Booth (19023–3) is credited as introducing interviewing to sociology, by embarking on a survey of social and economic conditions in London. Others followed, both in England and the US. Among the most notable early interview projects were Du Bois's (1899) study of Philadelphia and the Lynds's (1929, 1937) studies of Middletown.

During World War II the impetus of interviewing was magnified by large-scale interviews of American military personnel, some of which was directed by Samuel Stouffer and titled *The American Soldier*. In the 1950s, interviewing in the form of quantitative research moved into academia and dominated it for the next three decades. Some of the most notable proponents of this methodology were Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton at the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, Harry Field at the National Opinion Research Center in Denver and later in Chicago, and Rensis Likert with the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

There were other developments in interviewing. Opinion polling was popularized by George Gallup; the documentary method focused on respondents' attitudes, and was initially used by W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki; unstructured interviewing, often coupled with ethnographic research, was originally used by researchers at the Chicago School of sociology. Focus group interviewing moved from marketing to sociology and was employed both in quantitative and qualitative research. Oral history and creative interviewing were based on multiple, very lengthy interview sessions with the respondent. More recently, postmodern approaches have brought heightened attention to the negotiated collaboration in interviews between interviewer and respondents and the dynamics of gendered interviewing.

## STRUCTURED INTERVIEWING

Telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews, and interviews associated with survey research are included in this category. Structured interviews make an effort to standardize both the instrument (the interview questions) and the interviewer. The questions posed are generally preestablished, provide a limited number of possible responses, and leave little room for variations. This approach makes it possible to numerically code each response a priori. The interviewer attempts to remain as neutral as possible and to treat each interview in exactly the same manner. The same questions are read in the same sequence to all respondents; explanations to be given to the respondents are prepared in advance by the supervisor and the interviewer should not deviate from them or try to interpret the meaning of any question. The interviewer must ensure that no one interrupts the interview or tries to answer for the respondent. The interviewer should not attempt to influence any answer or show agreement or disagreement in regard to any answers. The interviewer must never deviate from the preestablished questions and their exact

wording. These efforts aim at minimizing errors and leaving little room for chance.

However, three types of problems arise in structured interviewing. Firstly, the task itself: the close-ended nature of the questions limits the breadth of the answers. Secondly, the interviewers: they do not in fact remain neutral but are influenced by the nature of the context and the variations among respondents. Additionally, the interviewers have been found to change the wording of questions. Thirdly, the respondents: there is an assumption that respondents will answer truthfully and rationally and will not let emotions or any personal agenda affect their answers.

### FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWING

Focus group interviews are basically a qualitative method; an interviewer/moderator assembles a small group of respondents in a conference room or similar setting in order to gather their collective opinions of the subject under study. The moderator directs the interaction among respondents and his or her approach can vary from very structured to completely unstructured, depending on the purpose of the interview.

Focus group interviewing originated in market research in order to collect consumers' opinions of various products. Sociologists use focus group interviewing for different purposes. Most common is to use the interview as an exploratory tool to fine-tune research topics or to pretest survey research structured questions. The interview can also be used for triangulation purposes to support and validate another method, either quantitative or qualitative. Finally, focus group interviews can be used as the sole basis of data gathering, often to elicit the respondents' recall of an event they all witnessed, such as a disaster or a celebration.

Focus group interviewers must possess skills similar to those of individual interviewers. Addressing a group, however, presents additional problems. The interviewer must ensure that all respondents are participating in the process and no one is dominating the interaction; also, the interviewer should be aware of the possibility of "group think." Focus groups are popular since they provide an alternative or addition to both

qualitative and quantitative research methods and are relatively easy to assemble and fairly inexpensive.

### UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWING

Unstructured interviewing, also called in-depth interviewing, is an open-ended methodological technique. The interviewer has a general idea about the topics of research but does not use any structured questions or formal approach to interviewing. There is no effort to ask the same questions of all respondents or to quantify the responses. The focus of this type of interviewing is to *understand* the way of life of the respondents and the meaning they themselves attribute to the events. We present three types of unstructured interviewing: traditional, oral history, and creative interviewing.

### TRADITIONAL INTERVIEWING

Traditional unstructured interviewing is often used in conjunction with ethnographic fieldwork and follows the same techniques. The interviewer has to *access the setting* of the group being studied, whether that be a welfare office or a massage parlor. Sometimes the study focuses on no group per se, as when studying homeless persons on the streets, and *entrée* must be negotiated anew with every individual. Next, the interviewer must make efforts to *understand the language and culture* of the respondents. Cultural anthropologists at times had to rely on interpreters, with perhaps disastrous misunderstanding of the cultural mores (Freeman 1983). Sociologists studying a subculture, such as physicians, also need to gain understanding of the language used. In addition, they must familiarize themselves with the cultural nuances of the group, such as not to ride a British bike while studying the Hell's Angels (Thompson 1985). *Locating an informant* is the next move. It is valuable to befriend a marginal member of the group under study with whom the interviewer can check the veracity of information being received by the others. *Gaining trust* and *establishing rapport* are next; the respondents must feel at ease and trust the interviewer or they will freeze them out, withhold information, or

lie. Trust and rapport take time to achieve and are easy to lose, just by a wrong decision. Finally, the interviewer must find an inconspicuous way to collect information, ranging from debriefing oneself every night into a tape recorder to surreptitiously writing fieldnotes on toilet paper in a rest room.

This type of unstructured interviewing is still somewhat formal in its step-by-step approach and its attempt to find checks and balances in an effort to “scientize” the study. Interpreting the information received is also problematic. Since there is no close-ended questionnaire, the researcher finds there is a great deal of what often seems disconnected information and has to decide what to use and what not to use. There is also a tendency, as in structured interviewing, to view the interviewer as “invisible” while in fact who is doing the interviewing has a great influence on the interaction and results.

### Oral History

Oral history is a very old approach to interviewing. It is based on lengthy, often multiple interviews with members of a specific group, such as a Native American tribe or elderly in a chronic care facility. Its goal is to capture the daily forms of life of the group under study through the recollection of its members. Oral histories are not always published, but transcripts can be found in libraries – memories of a past waiting for someone to bring them back to life.

### Creative Interviewing

Oral history straddles anthropology and sociology, while creative interviewing is more germane to sociology. Douglas (1985) coined this approach and it shares with oral history a technique based on multiple, lengthy, unstructured interviews with single respondents. Douglas’s approach is more skeptical, raising doubts about the veracity of the respondents and suggesting techniques to help pry the “truth” from them. The interviewer should become close to the respondents and share with them facets of their own life in a sort of confidential *quid pro quo*.

## POSTMODERN INTERVIEWING

Postmodern-informed researchers in both anthropology and sociology (Marcus & Fischer 1986) moved away from scientific claims about fieldwork and unstructured interviewing. Instead, they are reflexive about the role and influence of the interviewer in their interaction with respondents. They suggest ways to minimize if not eliminate this influence, by increasing quotations from the actual, unretouched statements of the respondents. Also, postmodern interviewers use a *polyphonic* approach, using multiple voices of respondents with minimal intrusion by the interviewer. The interviewer became visible, actively drawn out in the reporting, to help inform the readers about the possible biases and gendered, social, and contextual distortions created by whomever, wherever, and whenever the interview occurred.

We present two types of postmodern informed interviewing: gendered interview and active interview.

### Gendered Interviewing

There has been a pervasive tendency in traditional interviewing, whether structured or unstructured, to be paternalistic. It was not uncommon (in cultural anthropology) to give women researchers “temporary male status” to allow them to access settings and to talk to people with whom women would not otherwise be allowed to interact. The influence of gender in interviewing has been traditionally overlooked. Postmodern interviewers accuse traditional interviewers of ignoring gender differences in order to maintain the pretension of value-free and neutral research. Yet, as Denzin (1997) and other postmodern sociologists hold, interviews take place in a culturally paternalistic society where gender differences do matter.

In gendered interviews the interviewer must share herself with the respondent to gain her intimacy. Gendered interviewing is committed to maintaining the integrity of the phenomena studied and presenting the viewpoint of respondents. Yet this is not a ruse, as in creative interviewing, to get more information. Instead, the interviewer throws asunder pretenses of value neutrality and

becomes an advocate for the women (or other oppressed individuals, such as African Americans or gay groups) being studied. It is reminiscent of C. W. Mill's ameliorative sociology.

Some have pointed out that there may be times when the researcher does not see things eye-to-eye with the group studied and advocacy becomes very problematic. Others have confessed that the "sharedness" between interviewer and respondent is artificial, since it is still the researcher who has the power of producing a text from the interview. Edwards and Mauthern (2002) feel that rather than pretend that differences between interviewer and respondents have been overcome, they should be pointed out, as they cannot be eliminated.

### Active Interviewing

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) coined the term active interviewing to refer to the fact that interviews are actively negotiated accomplishments between the interviewer and the respondent. The two (or more) individuals actively collaborate in creating a text in a unique situation and a specific setting. According to Holstein and Gubrium, traditional interviews of all types stress too much the data gathered in the interview, regardless of how it was collected. The interviewer should also pay much closer attention to the latter, the ways in which data were collected – by whom, where, how, in what circumstances, and any other element that may have influenced the data. This approach is a very reflexive one, which rejects the notion that we merely gather data in interviews and use refined techniques to improve the quality of that data. Here the interview is a cooperative, negotiated text, created in the interaction and dependent upon it and the individuals involved.

### Reporting Interviews

Postmodern interviewers are also experimenting with new modes of reporting their findings. Rather than mimicking the sparse language of science as do traditional sociologists, postmodern reports at times take the form of performances, plays, introspective recounting, and even poetry. The intent is to provide a more immediate

and colorful picture for the readers, who can hopefully be more attracted to sociology and gain a better empathetic understanding through the immediacy of the new reporting techniques.

### Limits of Postmodern Interviewing

Postmodern interviewers have met with criticism from traditional interviewers. The question "but is it sociology?" has been repeatedly asked and not satisfactorily answered. Also, assuming that it is sociology, how does postmodern interviewing submit to the standard criteria of sociology, such as verifiability and replicability? Furthermore, how do sociologists judge the merits of the poetry or performance? Were these arbiters to judge them by literary standards they would fall very short; no other standards have thus far been suggested.

## ELECTRONIC INTERVIEWING

A new development in interviewing is through electronic outlets, especially the Internet. Given the tremendous expansion of home computers this means of interviewing allows access to a huge population. The technique cost little and can have a very speedy response. Of course, there is no face-to-face or even voice-to-voice contact, so we are faced with a "virtual interviewing" with almost no checks and balances of who the respondent really is and the veracity of their statements. Currently, electronic interviewing tends to rely on questionnaires, but some are already exploring the world of chat rooms (Markham 1998) and delving into the fabricated realities and online lifestyles of virtual online selves.

## ETHICAL ISSUES

Since the objects of inquiry in interviewing are human beings, there must be ethical considerations in their regards. All interviewers would agree to grant the respondents' rights to informed consent, anonymity, and protection from harm. Much of structured and unstructured interviewing research has no stake per se in the world of the respondents, albeit at times social policy

may arise from the findings of some studies. Postmodern interviewers aim for advocacy for oppressed and underserved individuals and groups whom they study, thus moving away from the traditional sociological goal of value neutrality and objectivity.

Another important ethical consideration is the relation and degree of involvement between researcher and respondents. Whyte (1943) has recently been accused (by Boelen 1992) of misrepresenting and exploiting his respondents, especially his closest informant, Doc. Having casual sexual relations with some of the respondents (as admitted by Goode 2002) certainly goes beyond the ethical involvement between interviewer and respondent.

Interviewing is a very varied methodology, but it ought to be, since human beings are very complex and find themselves in a myriad of different vicissitudes. Each and every subtype of interviewing should be able to get to some kind of answer, to reach some life description from the respondents. This is the goal: not just asking questions, but being able to get answers – meaningful answers.

SEE ALSO: Ethics, Fieldwork; Ethnography; Key Informant; Methods; Postmodernism; Quantitative Methods

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