INTERVIEWING : ART AND SKILL

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Introduction

AN INCREASING amount of interest is being generated for understanding the behavioural dimensions of the roles that actors like judges, lawyers, citizens play in shaping the legal and judicial system in a country. Undoubtedly, they are provided with constitutional roles but it appears that within these role definitions there is a considerable scope for an individual to give his role a direction and content that may be specific and dependent on his own volition and understanding of the system in its totality.

There are several ways of collecting data about what is happening to individuals or organisations. One way is to observe an event and then describe and understand the behaviour of people participating in the event. Another way is to ask an actor or actors participating in the event directly and find out what happened and why. This would yield data on how the individual perceived his role and that of others and what factors influenced him to act the way he did. This method of collecting data directly is known as interviewing.

The major strength of interviewing is that it is more effective in gaining information about a person's perceptions, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, motivations, anticipations or future plans. It gives insights into individual reactions and attempts at finding out his own reasons for behaving in a particular way rather than merely describing what actually happened.

Thus, the emphasis of interviewing is on verbal responses of the individual. The subject's response may or may not be taken on face value; it may be interpreted in the light of other knowledge about him or inferences may be drawn about aspects of his functioning which he has not reported. Regardless of the amount and kind of interpretation, however, the starting point is the self-report. Thus the interview can obtain only that material which the subject is willing and able to report.

It is for this reason that the purpose of the interview should be clearly laid down and understood. If the purpose of collecting data is to enumerate the number of cases that go to the rent controller every day and the number of tenants who bring in complaints, and to ascertain nature of these complaints, then interviewing the rent controller alone may not yield the most reliable data. However, if the purpose is to find out what the rent controller perceives as the major problem of landlord-tenant relationship

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or whether he is satisfied with the work that he is doing, then he must be interviewed. Similarly if the purpose of collecting data is to enumerate the number of patients who come to the hospital, at what times and with what complaints, then basing oneself on interviews with the attending doctors alone may not be so reliable. The best way will be to observe the movement of patients or look into the official records *etc.* However, if the purpose is to find out whether the patients are satisfied with the way the doctors behave towards them, then the patients must be interviewed.

The point is that the interview serves as an instrument to measure the behavioural reactions of the people but it may not be an adequate instrument to ascertain facts. Interviewing is oriented towards processes. It gives data on why an event occurred and how. The subjective element of the responses must be clearly recognised and if the aim is to establish facts, then other sources of data must also be used to verify them.

Interview can also serve as an excellent heuristic device. The researcher may not be able to determine the specific nature of a problem within an organisation and may find difficulty in developing a research design and in identifying the research techniques. Interviews with some crucial respondents can help the researcher considerably. The problem may be classified and hypotheses can be delineated. For example, if one was looking at the working of an organisation, it may be difficult to start with *a priori* hypotheses. Preliminary interviews will help in understanding the problem better and in making the research more realistic and sharply defined.

Thus, collecting data through interviews has qualities that personal observation and objective data and tests do not possess. Interview can obtain a great deal of information. It is flexible and adaptable to individual situations and it can often be used where other methods are not possible or are inadequate. However, what needs to be emphasised again is that the strength and weakness of the interview method lies in the fact that it gets at subjective data and depends on what the subject can and will report. Secondly, interview as a method must be integrated into the total design of data collection or used in conjunction with other methods. The subjective element of the responses must be clearly recognised and if the aim is to determine facts, the validity of such responses must also be established. Thus, if the effectiveness of a specific family planning campaign is being investigated, then the interviews with beneficiaries must be validated by interviews with the family planning personnel in order to validate each other's perceptions. The views may also need validation by data on files and records. Depending on the aims of research, interviews can be used to validate the findings from other techniques.

It is for this reason that interviewing is both a skill and an art. Effort has to be made to improve this skill and the ability of the respondent to give information. On the other hand, interview is an interactional situation. Two persons are involved—one asking questions and the other answering

them.   A proper social climate has to be created so that this exchange can be facilitated.   But more of this later.

Interviewing as a skill

Types of interviews

The form of interviews may vary widely.   Interviews may range all the way from the rigidly standardised to a completely unstructured interview. In the former both the questions and the alternative responses are pre-determined while in the latter both the questions asked and the responses given are left flexible and open.   Between these two extremes, variations are possible.

Standardised interview

In the standardised interview exactly same questions are presented to all the respondents in the same order.   The reason for standardisation, of course, is to ensure that all respondents are replying to the same question. This leads to comparability.   Differences in questions can also influence the meaning and implications of a given question.   The situation in which the respondent finds himself is a structured one.   His answers are limited by the questions he is asked and he cannot lead the interviewer.   He is in fact bound by him.   Consequently the structured interview may not get all the information even though the respondent may be willing to provide it.   Standardised interview may, however, differ, in the amount of structuring of the questions used.   It may present fixed alternative answers or leave the respondent free to answer the questions in his own words.

Fixed-alternative questions—Also known as closed questions, fixed alternative questions provide the respondent with given alternatives out of which he has to choose his answer.   These alternatives may be put up in various ways. They may provide for dichotomous answers like yes or no or they may provide for several degrees of approval or may consist of series of replies out of which the respondent can pick one which is closest to his own position.

Fixed-alternative questions have certain specific advantages.   They ensure uniformity of measurement and thus greater reliability.   They also force the respondent to make up his mind and answer the question in a way that fits the response categories previously set up.   However, there are also disadvantages.   Fixed-alternative questions have the major dis-advantage of being superficial.   The interviewer is unable to get below response surface.   A respondent may not find a suitable alternative but he is forced to choose one.   On the other hand he may choose an alternative to conceal his ignorance.

These disadvantages do not mean that such types of questions are useless.   They are extremely useful because they help the researcher deve-

lop his work in a planned and predetermined fashion. Also, such questions can be used with probes. Probing increases the response evoking power of questions without changing their content. Examples of probes are: "Tell me more about that?" "How is that?" "Could you please explain that?"

Open-ended questions—In contrast, the open-ended questions permit a free response. In fact they supply a frame of reference for respondent's answers but put a minimum restraint on the answers and their expression. The distinguishing characteristic of open-ended questions is that they merely raise an issue and do not provide or suggest any structure for the respondent's reply. He is given the opportunity to answer the question in his own way. For example: What do you think has been the role of the judiciary in the failure of land reform legislation?

The free response or open-ended question is especially useful (a) where the researcher has limited knowledge of the issue raised, (b) where he anticipates a great range of responses, (c) where a subject before him requires specific prompting or (d) where he wants to go a little deeper into the respondent's motivations.

A special type of open-ended question is the funnel. Actually this is a set of questions directed towards getting information on a single important topic or on a single set of related topics. The funnel starts with a broad question and narrows down progressively to the important specific point. To obtain information on citizen respondents, for example, one could use open-ended funnel questions. One of them could be as follows:

Most of us have witnessed traffic accidents or passed through when one has taken place. Some of us feel that such a situation needs to be ignored and left to the authorities concerned. Others stop on the roadside to find out what has happened and help the traffic authorities in catching the culprit or taking the injured to the hospital.

(1) What do you think ought to be done in such a situation?
(2) If you were going to office and find a traffic accident on the road, what would you do?
(3) Why would you do so?

Open-ended questions have important advantages. They are flexible; they have possibilities of depth and help clear misunderstanding of ambiguities. More importantly, open-ended questions help establish rapport with the respondents and make better estimates of respondents' true intentions, beliefs and attitudes. These advantages seem to make a strong case for such questions. There are, however, some inherent disadvantages. First, open-ended questions are unwieldy. Answers have to be recorded verbatim which may take a lot of time. This restricts the number of questions that can be asked and also creates difficulties for the interviewer in coping with the verbal barrage. Second, free response questions create problems in analysis. To interpret verbatim comments, it is necessary to devise a category system by which comments can be

grouped for meaningful analysis. However, the categorisation has to be carefully done for it may be too sketchy by ignoring several nuances or too broad to carry any meaning.

To conclude this discussion, closed and open-ended questions differ in purposes for which they are appropriate. Closed questions are more efficient where the possible alternative replies are known, limited in number and clear-cut. Thus, they are useful in securing factual information, *e.g.*, age, education, and for eliciting expressions of opinion about an issue on which people hold clear views. On the other hand, open-ended questions are more useful when the issues are complex or when the dimensions of the problems are not clearly known. They are also useful when the interest lies in the personal formulation of an issue by the respondent or in tracing the process of a decision or an event. Open-ended questions are also useful in exploring the reasons and motivations of actions.

Unstructured or less structured interviews

For several kinds of research questions, a still more flexible approach than a structured interview with open-ended questions is required. This is the type of interview in which neither the exact questions that the interviewer asks nor the answers the respondent is permitted to give are predetermined. Such forms of interviews are more appropriate where an intensive study of perceptives, motivations and inner feelings is sought to be made. The interviewer allows the respondent to speak, and probes only to elaborate a point or to allow the respondent to talk more. It is a completely flexible approach in which the respondent, to a great extent, determines the nature of interactions. He defines the interviewing situation himself. This type of interview achieves its purpose to the extent that the subject's responses are spontaneous rather than forced, are highly specific and concrete rather than diffused and general, and are self-revealing and personal rather than superficial. Obviously, this approach requires much greater skill in the interviewer than otherwise. Less structured interviews have been extensively used in anthropological and clinical work. The "personal history" interview used in social case work or psychiatric clinics is perhaps the most common kind of clinical interview. For example, one may be interested in finding out the causes of drug addiction among juvenile delinquents. Several relationships can be investigated by allowing the delinquents talk, their parents report *etc.* The interview guide may only list broad topics like childhood training and socialisation and then allow the interviewer to get information in the way the respondent wants to give.

The person is encouraged to express his feelings without directive questions or suggestions from the questioner. Interviewer is expected to ask questions about a topic but he is instructed to direct the respondent to one rather than another response.

Obviously, uniformity in such types of interviews cannot be achieved and thus comparability is very difficult. Consequently, analysis of data gathered from such interviews is time consuming and more complicated than the analysis of data obtained fiom standardised interviews. But it serves adequately when the purpose of interviewing is clear and well formulated.

Art of Interviewing

We have, up to now, discussed the technicalities regarding intervewing—how to frame questions and develop interviews so that the objects of research may be achieved. Careful handling of this part is only one aspect of conditions for successful interviewing. The other aspect is as important if not more so. This aspect is concerned with social situation that an interview creates. However, it must be emphasised again that the quality of interviewing depends upon proper study design. Even the most skilled interviewers will not be able to collect valid and useful data if the schedule of questions is inadequate to the survey's objectives or has been put together clumsily.

Because interview is a socio-psychological situation, the danger of distortions and biases arise in getting and recording information. Ideally, the interview schedule is an accurate record of each respondent's unin-fluenced answers at a given point of time. Interviewers are supposed to collect data which are original. Obtained directly from the respondent or through the respondent's perceptions of the interviewers, and comparable, the questions are posed in the same way to each respondent by the inter-viewer, so that different responses of the same question are not due to different ways of asking the question.

Intentionally or not, interviewers tend to bring in bias of their own. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the interviewer to create such an atmosphere that bias is minimised.

The first important way to minimise bias is that the interviewer should be neutral in bearing, attitude and method of asking questions in order to lessen conscious or unconscious influences on respondent's answers. No reac-tion to any answer should be conveyed by the interviewer to the respondents. Otherwise, he gets the clue about what answer is liked or not liked. The pur-pose is to get information. But a neutral interviewer may also rouse unfriendly feelings among the respondents. Therefore, the task before the interviewer is to establish rapport and develop a friendly atmosphere. This effort may mean time but is absolutely essential. However, principles for creating a congenial atmosphere cannot be delineated. In our social setting the way to develop this atmosphere will be different in the case of a doctor and in the case of a villager. The interviewer has to be adept at handling individual sensibilities and expectations.

To ensure this kind of rapport, many survey directors attempt to match the interviewer and respondent characteristics. Interviewers may be

recruited from the same village in which interviewing has to be done or educated interviewers may be chosen to interview otherwise qualified respondents. In our situation age can also be an important matching characteristic Social status is tied to age. Older people are treated with great deference and respect and it can be very difficult for a college graduate, for example, to interview a highly placed official in the ministry or some body much older than him. Secondly, the interviewer must ask the question as it is actually worded. He should not offer any explanations *etc*. which may alter the original thrust of the question. For similar reason, the questions must be asked in the same order as they appear on the questionnaire. Finally, the interviewer must ask every question. He should not skip any.

It is for these reasons that the survey directors have to give intensive training to their interviewers. Their morale has to be kept high so that they carry out each interview in the specified way.

Thus, the point that is being emphasised is that it is the responsibility of the interviewer to create an environment in which information can be elicited. This environment is firstly a function of the behaviour of the interviewer and secondly the way he treats the questionnaire in his hand. Bias will always enter but it can be minimised consciously. At least the people involved in research must be aware of this.

Sources

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