THE INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE

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A striking feature of Indian Society is the people's limited exposure to scientific investigations of any sort, more particularly to sociological enquiry. Only a very small number of individuals can talk first hand about an encounter with an investigator. Sociology and sociologists are still to find a place in people's cognitive frames. It can be taken for granted, therefore, that there would be wide spread ignorance about as important a tool in sociological studies as the interview technique.

To most people, the word 'interview' carries a specific connotation. It is invariably interpreted in the context of job-seeking, wherein a person is interviewed for assessment of his capabilities for a particular job. In media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, one comes across interviews held with prominent personalities in which they are induced to talk about themselves and about their experiences and views on particular issues. But the idea that an ordinary person could be talked to by a stranger who, in a matter-of-fact manner, in a one-sided conversation, would seek one's views and opinions on topics which may be of deep concern to oneself all in the pursuit of some abstract scientific goal — is quite a novel one for most people in India. That is to say, the use of this technique in any given social context would be influenced by how the respondents preceive it. One must be aware of this fact before embarking upon a research project aimed at collecting data through this technique. Interview is one of the most powerful techniques to yield sociological data and, as we shall see, highly adaptable in working out various research problems and in dealing with different segments of the society. In this paper we will enumerate the conditions calling for suitable adaptation of this technique of data collection in different cultural settings. Since any standard text book on research methods in social sciences discusses the problems of reliability and validity of the data collected through its use, we shall not go into a discussion of these dimensions. The focus will be on how different aspects of the use of this technique are perceived by the persons concerned and how these perceptions are likely to affect the technique in its operation.

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Interviews in methodology books have been generally categorized as being either structured or non-structured. The brief interview in which the interviewer seeks information on limited number of specific topics by referring to a questionnaire which carries simple yes-no type of close-ended questions, has been described as the structured interview. On the other hand, a fairly long encounter in which the interviewer talks to the respondent, aiming to draw out from him a lengthy and detailed articulation of his views and experiences, on the basis of written or unwritten list of open-ended questions pertaining to the research theme, is termed as the non-structured interview.

Whereas both types of interviews have certain common features in so far as both are influenced by the respondents perceptions of the interviews as well as of the interviewer, and their definition of the situation, the two vary in the depth of data generated and its standardization which in turn affect its validity and reliability. It is quite common to apply the structured interview technique in social surveys, population census, market research, and other smaller enquiries which are limited in scope and seek mainly to assess the distribution of certain properties in the population. Even in depth studies a certain amount of structured interviewing is done to get basic information on social characteristics in a given population. In what follows the more commonly employed technique in sociology and social anthropology, the non-structured type of interview, will be the focus, although what is stated in this connection may be of relevance to the other type of interview in many ways.

The interaction involved in an interview is essentially a social one and is influenced, like any other social relationship, by the psychological and social attributes of the interviewer and the interviewee, as well as of the setting in which it is taking place. The interview relationship is, therefore, culturally conditioned and is influenced by the culturally determined categories of cognition pertaining to social interaction, role evaluation and interpretation of behaviour. As such, its success or failure, if these be the terms used to assess an interview, depends upon the role behaviour of both the interviewer and the interviewee, and not only upon that of the latter. While ruling out the enunciation of a golden rule for interviewing, this fundamental feature allows adaptability of the technique to suit different situations, cultural settings and temperaments. At the same time, it directs attention to the need for the investigator to obtain a prior understanding of the cultural settings and social personalities to make the adaptations.

In the Indian setting, where impersonal interactions for most persons are rather uncommon, the interview cannot and does not remain for long an impersonal and one-way affair. The investigator arouses as much curiosity about himself in the respondent as does the respondent in the investigator. Being a social relationship between two roles, the interaction

may be emotionally and intellectually satisfying to either or both, or may terminate in mutual disappointment. It also has its psychological components and much depends upon personality traits of the two role incumbents who may or may not succeed in developing a workable rapport. Over a period of time an investigator may be able to find out which type of a psychological disposition of the interviewer is more conducive to rapport building in a given culture and at best he may try to cultivate the relevant personality traits. The respondents on their part may respond with complete cooperation and succeed in communicating their deep seated ideas and emotions and allow a peep into their innermost selves.

Since the role of the interviewer as well as his motive is not well understood, the respondents may spend much time and effort in assigning some social role or position to the interviewer so that interaction with him could be defined by them in some meaningful way. For placing the interviewer some where on his cognitive map, the respondent may rely on certain social cues which he may observe or about which he may put queries to the interviewer. The interviewer's age, sex, appearance, style of clothes, language and idiom, social and economic back-ground, education and rural-urban status, are important factors influencing the perception of the interviewer by the respondent and his subsequent behaviour towards him during the interview. For example, in the Indian setting, it is difficult for a male interviewer to establish rapport or to talk with young women to obtain information on reproductive behaviour. On the other hand a young unmarried, graduate girl student investigator may find it a tough job to elicit information on family property and marital disputes. In other words, certain characteristics of investigators may not be conductive to carry out interviews with particular segments of the population. This problem of bridging the cultural gap between the interviewer and the interviewee has been high-lighted in various field accounts of sociologists and social anthropologists.

Even though the interaction during an interview may, in course of time, become a personalized relationship of deep friendship, initially all interviews begin on an impersonal note. The investigator is, by and large, a stranger to the respondents. He has not only to establish his social and academic credentials but also that of his investigation. Whereas the interviewer may be able to put across his social credentials, since he carries some of these in his pleasance, with relative case, his academic and institutional credentials are more difficult to establish. It is relatively easy for the investigator in a Western society which is well exposed to sociological investigation, to announce his institutional affiliations, introduce the topic of research, assure the respondent about confidentiality of information disclosed, pose the questions, record (in writing as well as on tape) the answer on the spot, and depart after politely terminating

the encounter. Of late, interviewing on the telephone has also become quite common. In contrast, the situation has its own dynamics in the Indian cultural setting. If the researcher is pursuing doctoral research he may face the problem of explaining how a doctorate does not make a medical doctor to the respondent who is unfamiliar with doctoral scholars pursuing research for a University degree. If the investigator is employed then the respondent may not easily see the link between his job in an organization and the task of the moment namely, the interview, which involves just talking and posing questions.

It is also quite problematic for the investigator to present an uniform, easily understood, comprehensive explanation for his presence as well as for his enquiry. Why is he asking those questions? What is he driving at? What purpose will be served by the respondent's replies? Why this particular person and not others in his reference group have been selected to answer the question? From their experience, researchers advise that the readymade answer: "I am writing a book about your community and would like you to tell me about it", is quite helpful in satisfying the curiosity of the respondent. However, this reply in turn also raises certain queries. The interviewee, for example, may find it hard to correlate queries directed to him about his personal self, to writing of a book about the community. Also he may wonder why, if he had told him everything about the community the investigator was still interested in posing the same questions to others. Did not the investigator believe in what he had told him? The point that needs stressing here is that the curiosity of the interviewer, which is quite legitimate and justified, has to be satisfied before and during the interview. The interviewer has to depend upon his ingenuity to steer himself through such explicit as well as unexpressed questionings in the minds of his respondents in order to develop rapport with them.

Interview ethics enjoin upon the interviewer to keep the contents of the interview confidential and give assurance to the interviewee to that effect at the very beginning. But this is usually easier said than done in the Indian setting. Respondents who are familiar with sociological investigations and in particular with the interview technique, know what this confidentiality implies. This understanding is further reinforced by the knowledge that the respondent is one of the many being interviewed and that the investigator is interested more in generalizing than in the particular personal details of the respondent. However, respondents ignorant of this, who are having their first exposure to the technique, find it difficult to fathom the import of this assurance about confidentiality. Why should they be asked for confidential information by a stranger? Why should their answers be kept confidential? The problem is aggravated by the ignorance of the respondent as to how the information given by him will be used and what purpose will it serve. When the research

theme is such that it requires information on aspects which individuals do not wish to talk about for whatever reason the interviewer has to devise ways of eliciting it. It may be mentioned here that what is regarded as private or confiential is culturally conditioned. In my own field work among illiterate women, the statement about confidentiality given at the outset itself made the respondents all the more suspicious about my intentions behind befriending them. It put them on their alert and they showed hesitation in talking to me freely without first consulting their male family members, even on persumably innocuous topics. Rather than putting them at their ease, which such a declaration is supposed to do, it put them on their guard and made them suspicious. Subsequently, I gave the assurance only when it was asked for. It appears that women and men who live their lives confined to their homes and who are not used to dealing with the impersonal outside world, are reluctant to make conclusive statements to strangers on topics, confidential and otherwise, without consulting their elders or male family members. To some extent, group interviews fare better in this regard. The presence of other known persons promotes the respondents confidence in the investigator. However, not all research problems are amenable to group interviews and ways have to found to tackle the problem of building the respondent's confidence in the investigator. With increasing education, politicization and exposure to modern institutions and media people are much more on their guard in divulging their views on aspects which hitherto they had not considered as undisclosable. For instance, it is not easy now to get informtion on income, number of children, caste status, legal issues, political affiliations, and so forth. Information on such topics is to be sought cleverly and indirectly, perhaps through the use of some other research tools and techniques.

The problem of confidentiality is accentuated by the imperative of objectivity imposed on the investigator calling upon him to record accurately answers to his questions. In the case of structured interviews, on the spot recording is inevitable. But the fact that the statements are written out then and there makes the subject even more cautious about the information disclosed, apart from disturbing the rapport between the two as well as the smooth flow of conversation. Gadgets like the tape recorder, if the respondents know they are being used, may make the situation even worse. In the non-structured interviews, the long responses make it still more difficult to record the answers then and there. Writing down the answers has to be postponed till after the interview. The interviewers' keen memory and skill at scribbling a few key words on a piece of paper, on the sly, to be elaborated later in detailed notes, may help in data recording, but a price in terms of reliability of data recorded hours afterwards may have to be paid for it.

Another problem relates to the respondent placing the investigator in a particular stereotype and thereby underestimating his ability to comprehend the answers in their cultural and linguistic contexts. For example, villagers may doubt the capacity of a young, city-bred, English-educated scholar to understand, if not appreciate or sympathise with the intricacies of kinship obligations in a rural setting. This may colour the manner and depth at which questions are answered. The identification of the researcher as urban, educated, etc., may lead them to apprehend that he would frown upon their practices and exhort them to give up their ideas and superstitions. But at times the scholar may have just the opposite experience. For instance, while talking to village women, I found that they were rather pleasantly surprised to find an educated, modern, urban dweller like me, taking an interest in such matters of rural concern as caste, family, traditional health practices, and medical beliefs.

Conventional guidelines on the use of interview technique enjoin upon the investigator to impress on his subject that there are no right or wrong answers. In the Indian context, this is not an easy task. The responses that the investigator obtains, their intonation and accompanying gestures suggest to him that the respondents are continually trying to assess the expected answers, depending upon their stereotyping the investigator and their assessment of the general theme running through the questions. Some respondents may even counter-question to find out if their answers are correct or not. Then there are stereotyped answers which the respondents may have come to formulate on the basis of their past experiences and exposure to mass media. For instance, one may obtain stereotyped responses to questions on aspects of family planning, dowry in marriage, education of girls, casteism, and so on. Even though the research project may envisage obtaining infomation on what people actually do and on what they think customarily ought to be done, one may find that what people say is what "ought to be the case". The idea has changed from its traditional definition to its modern version defined by modern legal and political institutions as projected by mass media. For example, one may get stereotyped condemnation of the practice of dowry in marriage and yet find people participating in giving and taking of dowry. This may not necessarily mean double standards or hypocracy of the respondents, but that what people actually do believe in and follow in practice may be the opposite of what they have been made to say or project to others in a fast changing society trying to reform itself through the legal process.

Since interviews are carried on in a community on a sample of respondents, only a few persons get selected for this puspose. This has its own implications. The persons picked up often fail to understand why they in particular were chosen. That important persons in the community should be selected is understandable to them, but why ordinary persons

have been picked up, agitates them. What was it about them, known to the investigator, which made him choose them? As a matter of fact, it may be a big event in the community that certain persons are being selected for an interview. News about the presence of the investigator in the community, his appearance, mannerisms, his motives for studying the community, the nature of questions he is posing and the types of answers expected by him become topics for public discussions. While this phenomenon of spread of information itself may tell about the channels of information-flow in the community, it may nonetheless influence the nature of responses from subsequent respondents.

Whereas there are problems in developing rapport with the respondents—the intensity of which may depend upon the nature of the problem under investigation, the skills of the investigator and personality of the respondent not very uncommonly, problems crop up because of a good repport. The respondent may not like to terminate the conversation with the interviewer which he may find much to his liking and satisfaction. This is especially so if the theme of the interview relates to vital concerns, deeply felt emotions, sentiments, and the respondent's relationships with important members of his reference groups. Once he has found a patient and interested listener in the investigator, the respondent may like to draw him into other areas of his life experiences and talk at length on issues which may be of greater and more immediate concern to him. There may be a number of reasons for doing this.

One important reason appears to be the culturally defined holistic perspective on one's life experiences. People tend to see various aspects of their lives, their relationships with members of their reference groups and their problems, successes and failures in different sectors of life as interwoven with each other, in a holistic way. Consequently, they are not satisfied with giving only a partial view of matters which concern them vitally. Apart from this there is the tendency for proper image management before the investigator. There may be a feeling that his answers to the questions may put the interviewee in a light different from what he may like to be seen in. Therefore, the tendency exists to talk about one's behaviour and experiences in other spheres and to project the right image about himself before the interviewer. Another reason for the former could well be that the respondent is genuinely pre-occupied with what he may feel to be some more pressing and urgent problems which he may want to talk about to the investigator. This may be so because the investigator appears receptive enough, and in addition, may also appear to be the right person because of his education and exposure to modern institutions such as courts of law, to seek his advice regarding solutions to the problems. Research on law and medicine appears to be more prone to problems of the this type. Since almost every person has some health or legal problems, there are greater chances that on learning about the

interviewer's interests in say, law and legal institutions respondents will try to seek solutions to their legal problems which in their own estimation justifiably fall within the purview of the interview. Needless to say, tackling such a situation is time consuming for the investigator who is keen on retaining the respondent's cooperation.

There may also be situations, though not very often, where a good rapport may still not yield much information on the research problem at hand. This may be so for the very simple reason that the respondent does not have much information or clearly formed views on various issues. Or, that he has not grasped the meaning or import of the questions posed to him, i.e., the question goes over his head. In both types of cases, despite good intentions of the respondent to cooperate with the investigator, he is not of much use to the latter. Whereas the former type of situation may be helpful to some extent by proper sampling of respondents, for the latter, careful thought has to be put into the formulation and articulation of questions. A researcher's prior acquaintance with the community, its culture and its members, may help meet difficulties of this nature.

One of the major problems in administering a structured interview schedule is that it entails quick movement from one question to the next, from one topic to the other. Due to his time constraints the interviewer may like to complete the interview rapidly and, therefore, may hasten to move on to subsequent questions. However, such an act may be interpreted by the subject as indicating a lack of serious interest in the interviewee's responses on the part of the investigator. The respondent may like to reflect further on his response to the previous question and may want to modify or supplement. Rapid shift to the next, unrelated question takes him off to a different tangent, diverting him away from his reflections and thereby adversely affecting his spontaneity. The net result is that the interview leaves the subject dissatisfied and with a feeling of incomplete performance.

Given the above problems, carrying on in terviews in an Indian setting is a challenging task and gives the interviewer ample opportunity to use his skills in achieving results. Needless to say, good interviewing which yields the expected data is a source of great personal satisfaction for the researcher. To meet the challenges of interviewing one requires qualities of personality, social skills and training. Since interviewing is a skillful job, it cannot be left to raw untrained hands. The practice often adopted, of handing over packets of structured interview schedules to hired raw-investigators and asking them to interview respondents drawn from a sample, in a certain duration may yield poor results. No doubt, in surveys meant to study limited problems, this sort of venture may bear fruit. But when the study intends to go into greater depth of issues, emphasis on training of the interviewer becomes inevitable. However,

training may be vitiated if it is not accompanied by suitable personality traits. But not much can be done about the latter except orienting the investigator to what contributes to good rapport building in a given cultural milieu. One may also expect and hope that the investigator may, through experience, learn to understand his own personality and try to cultivate traits more conducive to rapport building and its sustenance during, if not after the interview.

Perhaps more can be done about the training. Efforts in training have to be broadly directed at preparing the interviewer to work in a given society and sensitizing him to collect all the information relevant to the theme of the research project. The cultural setting of the interviews should be made familiar to the interviewer. This would sensitize him to cultural and language nuances of his respondents. Secondary data about the community, prior visits to the area and casual talks with community members may help acquint the investigator with the cultural complexities he is likely to encounter. To appreciate and record all types of relevant data, the investigator should also be familiar with the broad theme of the research project of which the interview may only be a small part. Such a familiarity sensitizes the interviewer to capture other data or clues to more data even during the course of an interview. Without this acquaintance with the broad theme the investigator may miss valuable insights which may help in the interpretation of the data collected. As a matter of fact, a good interviewer is also an able observer. His observations about the interview setting, the non-verbal behaviour of the respondent, the changes in the tone of expression and records of other events and interruptions taking place during the interview may go a long in providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem at hand. One could go to the extent of recommending that the interview method should be preceded by some amount of participant observation in the community. This may help not only in the formulatian of hypotheses but also aid in sampling and in the preparation of both structured and non-structured schedules and their administration by the interviewer. Familiarity gained thus can help in deciding which aspects of the society are amenable to a structured schedule and which could be better left to free and open articulation of views and opinions. It could also indicate how best a representative sample could be selected from the community and what would be a convenient schedule for the interviewing — for example, whom to interview first, the best time of the day for interviewing and the most congeneal settings for the interview. In other words, various techniques of data collection may be combined simultaneously as well as sequentially to yield richer data and better insights into the problem under study.

The point being highlighted here is that the purpose behind providing training to the investigator should be to make him feel that he is not

merely a collector of data but that he should try to understand a given phenomenon in its varied aspects and linkages through talking to individuals and observing them. He is not there to elicit answers to the questions on the schedule but that he should also be sensitive and perceptive to all that he can pick up from the informant and the setting which is of relevance to the main theme of the research investigation. It is, therefore, neither possible nor desirable to demarcate the interview technique from other techniques such as observation. A number of techniques have to be combined to the best advantage of the research problem at hand.

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