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Contributors

William H. M. Bowens, Director of Audio-Visual Center

John H. Camper, Assistant Professor of Education

Yvonne T. Grantling, Instructor in Biology

Calvin L. Kiah, Professor of Education

R. Grann Lloyd, Professor of Economics

Farnese Hughes Lumpkin, Assistant Professor of
Home Economics

Eldridge E. Scales, Registrar and Professor of Education
Fort Valley State College

Alonzo T. Stephens, Associate Professor of Social Science

Elson K. Williams, Professor of Social Science

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Research Note on the Methodology Employed in Training Interviewers For a Study Utilizing the Intensive Interview Techniques

by

R. Grann Lloyd

and

John H. Camper

Increasingly refined intensive interview techniques are being used in socio-economic research. Intensive interview techniques are especially useful when the investigator is primarily interested in determining patterns of action and thought. The use of these techniques, however, requires special training. This research note is designed to share the experience derived from training interviewers to use a semi-structured interview schedule for the first time.

Probably, the most significant feature of this technique is its objectivity. The materials were prepared in advance, with all interviewers making the same inquiries of interviewees selected according to well-established sampling procedures. Hence, the findings afford a representative cross section of prevailing community thought.

One characteristic of the semi-structured interview technique employed was to use open-end questions which though leaving the interviewee stimulus free tended to structure the responses. It is believed that the use of this type of interview schedule tended to maximize the variety of response, to reduce to a minimum guidance and direction by the interviewer, and to allow the interviewee greater freedom of expression. Hence, whereas the semi-structured questions used did not focus attention on any particular phase of the stimulus situation, they did tend to circumscribe the informant's responses. The individuals interviewed were, within the limits prescribed by the semi-structured questions, free to give expression regarding the things of most significance to them. This non-directive approach may be used with much profit in exploratory studies.

The interviewers used in this study were primarily junior level college students in a teacher-education program. However, a minority of them were mature individuals pursuing studies in an adult education program. Because of its relation to the successful use of semi-structured interview sched-

ules and/or open-end questions, it seems not without significance to emphasize their maturity and training at this point. Many facts, which though relevant are not specifically solicited by the interview schedule, might be revealed which an interviewer without adequate prior academic training may neither observe nor record. Whereas it would have perhaps been more desirable to have the interviews conducted by college graduates, it is believed that the thorough training received by the interviewers in the use of intensive interview techniques, coupled with their enthusiasm, resulted in a creditable explorative study.

The training period for the interviewers who conducted this study extended over a period of ten days. This training was initiated with a five days orientation period, with attention focused on (a) the sampling design employed, (b) the nature, scope, and objectives of the survey, (c) the interview schedule, with particular reference to the semi-structured schedule or questionnaire, and (d) the intensive interview techniques. The primary objectives of this initial training period were (1) to acquaint the interviewers with the nondirective approach and the mechanics of the interview schedule, (2) to acquaint them with techniques that generally secure usable responses, and (3) to familiarize them with the objectives underlying each question. The remaining portion of the training period was devoted to practice interviews among the interviewers themselves and conducting interviews in non-sample areas. After each session of practice interviews and/or interviews in non-sample areas evaluation sessions were held with the trainees. Each question was carefully edited with the interviewer in order to give the interviewer a thorough understanding of the question, to correct recording and procedural errors, and to eliminate deficiencies. Indeed, these evaluation sessions involved a qualitative analysis of the completed interview schedules.

The interviewers were urged to become familiar with and observe the following criteria of a successful interview:

1. Help the interviewee feel at ease by meeting him cordially—with a pleasant greeting and by calling his name.
2. Provide an atmosphere conducive to a good interview and allow the interviewee to "get settled"—to get the "feel" of the situation before plunging into the interview.
3. Be sincere.
4. Make the interview a cooperative undertaking.
5. Avoid approaches that might destroy rapport and arouse antagonisms, but uncover the real issue or difficulty.

6. Seek a positive—a “yes” response at the very beginning. Often the interviewee will take a “yes” response cue and go on from there.
7. Do not embarrass the interviewee unnecessarily. The interview is not, and must not, be allowed to become an inquisition.
8. Face the facts professionally.
9. Alleviate the shock of disillusionment.
10. Listen—let the interviewee tell his own story in the way he wants to tell it.
11. Avoid a patronizing attitude and use your sense of humor.
12. Avoid interruptions and achieve something definite.

Since the research design specified that the interviewers should enter 1000 homes in the Savannah-Chatham County community, a large number of interviewers were needed. Hence, it was necessary to train a relatively large number of individuals. On the other hand, since the questions were semi-structured in advance, relatively little skill was required of the interviewer; moreover, the chances of the interviewer injecting his own bias were reduced to a minimum. Furthermore, the interview schedule was carefully designed with a view to gathering data in a manner affording fairly simple analysis. This design made it possible to use some volunteers in the analysis of the data who had no previous training—a possibility that would not have existed if the questions had been unstructured or in an analysis based primarily on the interpretation of complex data. Thorough training in the use of intensive interview techniques, together with participation in the analysis, gave the interviewers a satisfying sense of identification with the total research survey.