ASSESSING SOCIAL SKILLS IN THE RESEARCH INTERVIEW

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THE INTERVIEW AS A SOCIAL MEASUREMENT SITUATION

The research interview, in contrast to other uses of the inter­
view, is not just employed for the purposes of information gathering; as Cannell and Kahn (1968, p. 530) have summarised a widely shared view, "it has to do with that particular quantitative form of information getting called measurement."

Ideally, measurement in the research interview implies a stimulus-response model of the question-answer process. Each question is thus seen as involving just one particular set of stimulus material which must be used uniformly in all interviews included in a data collection programme. In order to achieve responses which are contingent on the stimulus material alone all interviewing procedures used must be equivalent and must not affect the answering process other than in terms of facilitating the provision of the appropriate responses. Further, the respondents must act in the interview as desired by the researcher, that is, they must provide adequate answers to the questions. When these assumptions are realised in a data collection programme, the responses obtained may be regarded as equivalent; this, in turn, is a necessary pre­
requisite for the statistical manipulations used in data analysis.

In the practice of research interviewing, however, it has often proved difficult to meet the conditions for adequate measurement fully because of various forms of bias arising in the interview situation (see Hyman et al., 1954; Cannell and Kahn, 1968; Phillips, 1971, 1973; Deutscher, 1973; Sudman and Bradburn, 1974). In general, two sources of bias must be considered. The first originates from the interviewer's presence in the interview. There exist a large
number of studies indicating that virtually any attribute of the interviewer, from demographic characteristics such as sex or colour to very delicate aspects of speech and bodily communication, can, under certain conditions, bias responses. The second source of bias originates from the respondent. For example, response bias may arise because of problems of recall or of the proper understanding of what is meant by a question or because of motivational barriers such as lack of willingness to report accurately.

While it may be impossible to remove certain kinds of respondent bias from the interview, such as forgetting or the effects of social desirability of question content (see Phillips, 1973), various forms of control of bias can be established as far as the interviewer is concerned. However, not all attributes of the interviewer can be equally well controlled. Once interviewers have been selected little can be done, for example, about such attributes as their bodily appearance and the kinds of voice and accent displayed in their speech. But it is always possible to control the range and kinds of social skills employed in the interviewers' actions.

Control over the interviewer's social skills competence involves three areas of activity. First, the social skills to be used by the interviewer must be designed. Considerable effort has gone into the design aspect of interviewing skills, and it is now clear what interviewers must do in order to gather information reliably and accurately (see Cannell and Kahn, 1968; Atkinson, 1971; Gordon, 1975; Interviewer's Manual, 1976). Secondly, interviewers must be trained in the use of the social skills involved in interviewing. Various suggestions for the general outline of training have been made (see Cannell and Kahn, 1968; Moser and Kalton, 1975; Hoinville, Jowell, et al., 1978), but both the content and structure of interviewer training remain so far quite unspecified. Thirdly, there must be an assessment, for any particular data collection programme, of the degrees to which interviewers have succeeded or have failed in their employment of the skills of interviewing. The aspect of assessment of interviewing performance, although it allows a direct form of quality control, has so far been largely ignored with few exceptions (see Marquis and Cannell, 1969; Cannell, Lawson and Hausser, 1975).

In this paper, I attempt to discuss these three aspects of control over the interviewer's performance. I will first consider the rules of interviewing, as these determine the design of interviewing skills. Then I will report some findings of an assessment of interviewing performance in a particular survey; this is to point out that interviewers, despite the training they have received, may fail to comply with the essential skills requirements of interviewing, this indicating, among other factors, that the training has been ineffective. I then suggest a method for interviewer training, based on a particular social psychological approach to interviewing and designed to increase the effectiveness of training. Finally, I