CHAPTER 22

Interviewing: An Introduction

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Interviews are one of the more common methods of data collections that use direct interaction between researcher and subjects. In their most basic form, interviews are defined "... as a conversation with a purpose" (Berg, 2007, p. 89). Interviews are usually direct, face-to-face questioning that aims to achieve as much in-depth information as possible. The benefits of interviews are twofold:

1. To gain a more accurate understanding of previously observed behavior
2. To achieve information on specific topics that are not, or cannot, be observed. This will usually refer to more secretive topics, such as backstage police activity, to which access is difficult to gain.

By questioning others, the researchers emphasize the weakness of their role in the examined society.

Interview Topics in Criminology and Criminal Justice

The information that can be gathered from interviews in the field of criminology and criminal justice is rich. Depending on the aims of the study, researchers can interview offenders, police officers, correctional officers, community care-givers, regular members of the community, politicians—the list can go on and on. At times, it seems there is no limit to the topics that can be covered by an interview. However, most criminal justice and criminology researchers use this method to gain insight into specific aspects of the behavior in which they are interested. For example, Becker (1963) explored the culture of jazz clubs and how jazz players and people who attend the clubs are socialized to smoke marijuana. Becker first observed the behavior but then went further by interviewing individuals, using non-structured informal interviews (a concept that will be discussed further in the following sections). Becker determined how they become marijuana users, how they learn their smoking techniques, how they become a part of a group, and when and why users become labeled as "deviant." Other studies may be interested in learning about a crime-fighting technique and thus would be interested in interviewing police chiefs and police-training specialists.

Interview topics normally correspond with the sensitivity of the topic and how easy or difficult it may be to identify and reach out to potential interviewees. Some criminologists are interesting in interviewing those engaged in illegal behavior to gain insight into the nature of crime and criminality (see Bennett, 1981). Interviews also enable offenders to explain their motives and lifestyles from their own perspective (Copes & Hochstetler, 2006).

Conclusions based on interview data are important to students, professionals, and scholars interesting in understanding, conceptualizing, and developing theories and methods to prevent and deter future crimes. Relying on in-depth information that is gathered by interviews provides the researcher with the necessary insights needed. As discussed in Chapter 21, interviews in conjunction with observations may also prompt new theories, referred to as ***grounded theories***.

No matter what the interview topic is, researchers who use interviews as their main data-collection method must engage in thorough preparation before entering the scene to conduct interviews. Such preparation is crucial in helping the researcher to identify potential individuals who will be used as ***informants*** and to gain preliminary ideas and important information about the topic and individuals to be interviewed. Such preparation can also assist the researcher in identifying which individuals should be interviewed and what questions should and should not be asked. Depending on the topic and aim, researchers should also choose the style of interview they will use. As explained in the following section, different types of interviewing methods will be appropriate to different types of topics.

Types of Interview

Interviews are classified according to their level of formality and how structured they are. The interviewer can openly approach subjects, asking to interview them in a formal setting, or suggest to them that the intention is to engage them in a conversation in which the interviewer can learn about the research subjects' experiences and thoughts. Many times, highly formal and structured interviews will use "interview surveys" as a guide to the interview. Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all surveys are interviews, and accordingly, not all interviews use surveys. This is mainly because some interviews will be less formal; the interviewer uses regular "small talk" as the platform to weave in questions of more substance that are of interest and importance to the study. Formal, survey-based interviews and casual conversation (informal interviews) are two opposite ends of a continuum. Most researchers engaged in interviewing as their main method of data collection will use a combination of methods found on that continuum.

Since the formal interview is highly structured and relies on participants' willingness to go along with the interview, it can be a very useful method to obtain a wealth of information in an organized manner from many different individuals. Such interviews are often structured to be long and in-depth, and rely on previous knowledge gained from observations, reading of previous research, documents to which the researcher was exposed, and so on. In-depth interviews enable researchers to test their research hypotheses. Highly structured and formal interviews are many times referred to as ***surveys***, in which the researcher gathers systematic information that can be easily and quantitatively analyzed (see Chapter 18). In fact, many researchers who use surveys enter the information directly into their laptops, a procedure that not only saves time but also allows them access to some basic data analysis while they are still out in the field. As you already know, there is no honey without the sting, and highly structured interviews have their disadvantages.

One of the main disadvantages of highly structured interviews lies in the nature of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Interviews are not egalitarian conversations and tend to be very unidirectional. The interviewer presents the questions, and the interviewees answer these questions. Some say this is a very paternalistic approach; the interviewer holds the power and directs the conversation, whereas the interviewee is powerless in terms of controlling what questions are asked and when to talk. However, in adherence to

Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols of research ethics, interviewees are allowed to refuse to answer specific questions with which they do not feel comfortable, or they can stop the interview at any given time. In any case, such situations of unbalanced conversation are not natural, and it is highly likely that responses provided by the interviewee will be affected by the situation, the status of the interviewer, and even the setting of the interview. Consequently, some of the information may be biased due to *social desirability*, and the validity of the results may be questioned.

In part due to these potential problems, researchers may decide to use a less formally structured interview, one that will resemble a regular conversation. Using less formal and less structured methods, the researcher poses less stress on the interviewee, who may feel more an equal participant in the process. During the conversation, many topics might emerge, some of which may be more relevant to the study and others which may not be relevant at all. Many times, interviewing researchers may be confronted with topics that had not previously seemed important, but which surface through informal conversations. This process can be one of the greatest advantages of the less structured interview vis-à-vis the highly formal and structured interview. For example, Gideon (2007), interviewing recovering substance-abusing inmates, had a set of structured questions he wanted to ask. After a few initial interviews, Gideon decided to neglect the structured format and conduct the interviews in a more informal manner. In the less formal and less structured setting, interviewees divulged a wealth of information about their interactions with their spouses before their recent incarcerations. The main knowledge gained was the fact that returning directly home from prison without any marriage counseling may account for relapse to substance abuse and further criminal involvement. At times, it is better to keep an open mind when it comes to data collection.

Once in the field, researchers should make an attempt to gather as much information as they possibly can, and less formal interviews are one of the ways to go about this. Of course, this too comes with a price tag. Many times, interviewees in less formal and less structured interviews tend to talk about things that are of interest only to them, and as a result, they may divert the focus of the researcher from the research goal. Researchers can also be sidetracked by idle conversation that serves little purpose. Trained interviewers may avoid such scenarios by directing the conversation back to desirable topics, although they will not always be successful. Their success depends many times on the individuals with whom they are dealing and the context in which the interview takes place. For example, interviewing active substance abusers can be a very challenging endeavor. The same goes for interviewing the elderly, who may simply desire attention and conversation with others.

The type of interview a researcher chooses depends on several factors. The first is the accuracy of responses. If the interviewer is seeking to learn about specific costs of different substances and what substances are used, a more formal interview could be in order. However, if the researcher is seeking to understand drug markets and the relationships among traffickers, dealers, and buyers, a less formal interview will have to take place. Another important factor is the potential for ***social desirability*** bias, which means that interviewees are likely to change their behavior in response to the interaction between them and the researcher. For example, males interviewing other males about sexual activity may find different results than when the same sample of men is interviewed by a female interviewer. To promote higher reliability, and depending on the sensitivity of the interview topic, the researcher may wish to consider using a less formal method to interact with the interviewee. The hope is that a less formal interview allows the interviewer to gain more trust, allowing those being interviewed to "open up."

Environmental factors may also help to account for variation in interviewees' responses (Childers & Skinner, 1996). How private or public the interview is can affect the results, in particular when the topic is sensitive or controversial. Interviews in public, where other individuals are present, may affect interviewees' responses and the interview process. Many interviewers will try to overcome such problems by conducting informal, private follow-up interviews, which at times may even be disguised as regular small talk.

When Gideon (Shoham, Gideon, Weisburd, & Vilner, 2006) interviewed incarcerated inmates, each interview was affected by the conditions allowed by the facilities. For example, some facilities allowed the interview to take place in the social worker's office without any supervision, while others took place in the cells or in the presence of a guard. When the interviews were conducted in the presence of others, it was clear to Gideon that the inmates were acting out and thus not providing accurate information related to the research question. Those interviews were dropped from the analysis due to their biased nature.

Berg (2007) identifies another type of interview, falling in between the formal and informal interviews, which he refers to as ***semi-standardized interview*** (equivalent to ***semi-structured interview***) in which a number of predetermined questions and special topics are to be covered during the interview. This interview process leaves room for other topics to emerge, and there is more flexibility for the interviewer to move backward and forward among the items. In such semi-structured interviews, the interviewer is not locked to a specific question or topic order and can change the order of the questions according to the interview development and relevancy of the conversation. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate in cases where the researcher wants to be cautious and receptive to information that may not be identified in the initial planning stages of structuring the interview. Other times, semi-structured interviews develop from the interview itself, where the researcher receives very dull or minimal information such as "yes" and "no" responses. Using a semi-structured approach, the interviewer can prompt the interviewee to provide more detail by asking additional clarifying questions, such as, "I understand this was very difficult for you. Can you please explain what you did afterward?" Being able to provide feedback to interviewees, and in particular during highly sensitive studies such as those that involve interviewing rape victims, prostitutes, or illegal workers, it is not only beneficial to the information-gathering process but reassures interviewees that the interviewer is genuinely interested in their stories and cares about their experiences. This in turn can translate to higher-quality information that may not have been possible to gather using a fully structured formal interview with surveys.

Depending on the type of interview and directness of the interviewer, various technological aids may be either an advantage or disadvantage. The formality and level of structure of an interview can also be a product of the technologies used. For example, a computerized survey is a highly structured, formal interview. A voice recorder without any other aids may be perceived as more formal than a simple pen and paper. An open conversation without any accompanying aids gives the feel of an informal and non-structured interview, and could be less threatening to the interviewee. Regardless, an increasing number of studies that rely on interviews use voice recorders, as they can provide major advantages to the documentation process and allow the interviewer to pay more attention to the conversation and responses. But (as always), there are disadvantages:

1. Transcription and coding is an extremely time-consuming, laborious, and potentially expensive process.
2. The interview location may be noisy, making audio recording of limited use.

3. Machines break, or may not be turned on. Relying solely on an electronic or mechanical device is risky. Most researchers get just one chance to interview specific individuals. If the researcher relies solely on the voice record without taking notes, he or she may be in for a nasty surprise, as Gideon was unfortunate enough to discover after an hour and a half of intensive interview with a prison warden (Gideon, Shoham, & Weisburd, 2010). At the end of the interview, it turned out that the tape recorder had malfunctioned and the tape had gotten caught in the device. Luckily, the warden was nice enough to go over the major points of the conversation to make sure accurate documentation was available.

4. People being interviewed may simply not want to risk having their opinions recorded, as they may later regret the things they say. Sometimes, interview subjects will ask for a statement to be "off the record," that is, information that the interviewee shares with the interviewer but does not give the interviewer permission to quote or publish. The concept of "on the record" or "off the record" comes from journalism and does not really apply to social science research, since all interviews are technically "off the record." Rarely if ever are real names and identifying characteristics used in the publication of such interview data. Regardless, the mere presence of a recorder can give the perception that the interview is "on the record," causing those being interviewed to censure themselves.

It should be made very clear—clearer than the researcher may think necessary—to those being interviewed the confidential nature of the work, how the researcher will safeguard such information, the subject of the research (usually, the subject is a general topic and not an individual), and that the interviewee has control over what is recorded. Such information should be explained clearly to the person being interviewed; simply having the interviewee sign an "informed consent" form may protect the researcher in some limited legal way (which is not at all the purpose of informed consent) but does little to guarantee an understanding of the issues involved. Clarity in such matters not only is essential to researchers' ethical and professional obligations, but also can build trust and yield much better data.

One technique, used by Gideon (Shoham et al., 2006), was to give the voice-recording device to the inmates to hold. Gideon then explained how it worked and showed the person being interviewed how he or she could pause, turn off, and even eject the tape if he or she wished to withdraw from the interview. After this step was taken, no concerns were expressed about the device, and interviewees spoke freely about their experiences (which, as was noted, did not happen when the same people were interviewed in public areas).

When Moskos (2008) recorded an interview with a fellow trainee in the Baltimore Police Academy, he found the data to be of limited usefulness. The officer being interviewed used carefully phrased responses and had a generally on-guard tone that did not reveal any major insights. Moskos noted that when they know they are being recorded, police officers sound like the officers on the television show *Cops*, who speak in a stilted manner and use (not always correctly) formal legal language. Given the poor quality of the data in the recorded interviews, Moskos quickly abandoned the tape recorder and relied on pen and paper to take notes, using the most informal interview method: casual conversation. Covert recordings are rarely if ever a viable option, as not only are there serious ethical issues, such practices are also illegal in many states (including Moskos's research site of Maryland). Besides, in immersion-type participant observation, it is not realistic to have a recorder running at all times. There is simply too much data.

Moskos's (2008) time in the field, twenty months, is on the longer side of most participant-observation research. Such a long time frame removed pressure to gather relevant data quickly. More sensitive topics, such as racial attitudes, could be broached when circumstances made bringing up such subjects more appropriate. There was never a point at which "interviews" formally began and ended. Being fully immersed in the police world, both on and off duty, Moskos, because he *was* a police officer while he conducted his research, never had to worry about access to police. On the other hand, ease of access may come at the expense of objectivity. In the trade-off between immersion and objectivity, Moskos clearly valued the knowledge gained from immersion as more significant than any benefits from maintaining a more traditional, objective research position.

Officers were generally very open and unguarded with their opinions, as they would be in any private conversation. Interesting, revealing, typical, and even sensational snippets from conservation would be written down after the fact. One advantage of such a method—relying solely on notes taken at the scene and filling in details as soon as possible—is that the researcher by default culls the vast majority of superfluous data right at the start. But when one takes notes only selectively, the researcher must presume (and hope) that missing information does not later turn out to be significant. Anything not written down is quickly forgotten and as far as the researcher is concerned never happened. Another risk of using selective quotes to illustrate points is that it demands a certain faith from the reader in trusting the researcher's ability to parse sociological and criminological significance from late-night or drunken conversations.

While Moskos was completely open about his status as researcher, the interviews themselves could be considered somewhat covert in that they never had a clear beginning or end. Data was taken from general conversations. Though these conversations were not recorded, additional ethical considerations are raised because the researcher's figurative tape recorder was always running. The researcher has an obligation, both professionally and personally, to protect those being studied. Even the issues of willing participation can be somewhat clouded if the researcher is observing people at work. Moskos conducted research while both on and off duty. While fellow officers did not need to associate with Moskos socially, on duty, it was not possible for officers not to respond to a call simply because Moskos was present.

To protect his fellow police officers—some of whom Moskos says became his close friends—quotes are provided without detailed descriptions of the speakers. Nor does Moskos's book include "characters" in the traditional literary or ethnographic sense. The end result is that those familiar with the officers involved may be able to attribute specific quotes to specific officers, but one cannot attribute all quotes to a single officer. Further complicating matters is the fact that his research site and even his coworkers were a matter of public record. Moskos was not concerned about academics or the public knowing (or caring) who said what, and he made no attempt to disguise his research site by giving Baltimore some bland pseudonym. But he was concerned about unforeseeable career harm coming to officers from *within* the police department. Since there was no recording of any conversation or interview, those quoted would always have plausible deniability. If confronted, they could simply deny they were the source. To further protect research subjects, Moskos showed those in his book the completed manuscript before publication and asked if there were any objections or mistakes. There were none. Moskos found that those quoted in his book had little objection to portrayals that were not always positive. Even police officers, not generally considered an at-risk group, can feel misunderstood and quite powerless in the glare of publicity. Officers simply wanted themselves and their working conditions to be presented honestly and in context. Many of the officers later thanked Moskos for, in effect, serving as their voice.

Types of Questions to Ask

The range of questions that can be asked during an interview is extremely wide. Questions can be simple as "How old are you?" and as complex and sensitive as "Have you ever engaged in sexual intercourse in exchange for drugs?" The questions asked can also be very complex in their structure and may range from very simple multiple-choice questions to highly demanding questions that seek in-depth description and information. Questions can be fully structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. You probably can guess that there is a connection between the type of interview and the type of questions asked. ***Structured questions*** are planned by the researcher ahead of time, clearly phrased, and even tested prior to the interview. A written list of the exact questions to be asked and their order is called an ***"interview schedule."*** Such preparation can be useful in gaining access to an organization (and IRB approval). But one can always deviate from a list of questions and adopt different methods to reflect new understandings or a change in field conditions.

Usually, we distinguish between two types of structured questions: (1) ***open-ended questions***, to which the interviewer does not provide a set of potential responses, and (2) ***multiple-choice questions***, in which the interviewer is provided with few relevant alternatives as optional responses. As always, both methods raise certain concerns. Open-ended questions may attract irrelevant responses that may sidetrack the interviewer. Multiple-choice questions may block the respondent's memory or divert his or her attention from more accurate responses that were not presented by the interviewer. Also significant is the order of potential responses in multiple-choice questions, which may affect the answers picked by the respondent regardless of what he or she really thinks or believes. But the main disadvantage of the structured-question format is found in the influence the interviewer has on the interviewee, as well as in the level of response validity. Not being able to express one's true thoughts because of the limitations of the question format can be very frustrating to those being interviewed. The use of structured questions reduces the potential of receiving new and surprising information because the questions are limited by the researcher's previous knowledge and preparation.

In normal, everyday conversations, structured questions are not natural. Researchers seeking to use them in a study must prepare thoroughly before they use such a method in a field interview. This preparation requires that the researcher already be familiar with the group being examined, including its language and terminology, as well as potential and appropriate questions and answers. Using wrong terminology or even wrong dialect can result in biased results. However, once the items are carefully constructed and the interviews are completed, data can be analyzed relatively easily. This is even more the case if the questions used are multiple-choice.

When using structured, open-ended questions, the interviewer must be conscious of the meaning of the words used. It is possible that simple concepts that mean one thing in the researcher's own culture and society mean different things in the interviewee's culture. For example, take the question, "Do you ever feel *chilled* when you hear about domestic violence cases?" While the researcher may use the word *chilled* to describe a feeling of being horrified by a certain incident, the term could easily be misunderstood by those who understand "chilling" to mean "relaxing" or "taking it easy." Other times, slang can become an interfering factor in the interview process if the researcher is unaware of certain vocabulary used by inmates. This may place the researcher in the awkward situation of asking what a word or phrase means. At best, which is not necessarily bad, the researcher looks clueless. Worse, the researcher might be assumed to be a fool and perhaps subject to

ridicule. Still worse, the researcher may miss the actual meaning of what is said. Worst of all would be actively misinterpreting what the person means.

For example, a researcher might ask inmates if they would like to have *fish* as part of their regular meals; in prison slang, the word *fish* means a newly arrived inmate, and thus may be understood differently from how the researchers intended. Another interesting example can be the use of the word "schooled," which means in prison lingo that the inmate is highly knowledgeable in the ways of prison life and is a reference source to other inmates. Moskos (2008) points out that even police lingo can mean very different things in different places. Among Baltimore police, to "jack somebody up" means to frisk somebody aggressively on the street, but among New York City police, "jacking a person up" implies an extralegal beating. Moskos learned this only when he casually used the phrase with New York City police officers and saw the look of shock on their faces. The researcher need not (indeed, *should* not) present himself or herself as being as smart or "cool" or knowledgeable as the person being interviewed. The very purpose of conducting an interview is to learn from the person being interviewed. No matter your education and experience, always assume those being interviewed know something you do not. That is why you are interviewing them in the first place—expect to be surprised, and if you do not understand something, ask.

While asking interviewees for clarification is a natural part of the interviewing process, researchers should not go into the field or interview without preparation and some sense of what to expect. Researchers need to be serious and credible, and to respect the time and sincerity of those being interviewed. Asking questions that reflect a complete lack of understanding of those being interviewed serves no purpose. Even worse, it can put the interviewer in a position where interviewees lose respect for the interviewer, consider the interview a waste of time, and may even feed the researcher nonsense answers. Planning ahead of time with structured questions enables the researcher to ask appropriate questions, phrase the questions in such a manner that analysis of the responses will be relatively quick, and enable the researcher to test the study's hypotheses.

Different from structured questions, ***unstructured questions*** are not planned ahead of time, and their phrasing is not as rigid. As a result, their flexibility becomes one of their most valuable assets, as they can prompt new and other questions. Researchers can react to information provided from a previously presented question by asking other questions that are of interest. Take, for example, the question, "Do you think any of the officers in your district will be promoted in the near future?" Responses to that question can prompt other related questions, such as, "Who do you think will be promoted?" and "Why do you think [this officer] will be promoted and not [another officer]?" It can also lead to more revealing answers about an interviewee's chances of being promoted and why he or she may believe he or she is being held back.

Unstructured, spontaneous questions in an informal interview require the interviewer to have a good knowledge and functional grasp of the language and culture of those being interviewed. This is needed to help divert and direct the conversation in the desired direction. One of the main advantages of unstructured questions is that researchers can present them almost at any time and place without advanced planning. They also do not require the researcher to have a previous thorough knowledge of the researched topic, and are very similar in nature to the exploratory design discussed earlier in this book (see Chapter 9). The researcher can enjoy the flexibility of the design and react to ongoing events in the field. Another advantage is that unstructured questions and interviews allow interviewees to speak more freely and to present their opinions, positions, and perceptions, at times providing the interviewing researcher with unique and valuable information that was not

previously known to the researcher. This is why many researchers who seek to understand a culture use this method, as did Einat (2005) in an attempt to explore inmates' subculture through their argot. Einat spent weeks with incarcerated offenders in their cells and yard. Encouraging the inmates to speak freely and fluently without any disturbance from him, the interviewer, Einat attempted to learn their culture and to understand the importance of their argot (language) in their culture: why and when it is used, by whom, and against whom. Using this method, Einat was able to identify six main categories of words: violence and use of force, sexual behavior, loyalty and squealing, the prison and staff, drugs, and others. Einat learned that these categories reflect the needs and interests of, and stress experienced by, inmates. Language connected all incarcerated offenders in the amalgam of prison life, allowing them to identify with each other and achieve social cohesiveness.

A disadvantage of unstructured interviews is that reliable, quantitative analysis of results is not possible unless one asks the same question in the same way to different people. For instance, Moskos (2008) analyzed differences in attitudes of white and black police officers toward policing. Since his interviews were unstructured, he was able to draw general conclusions about differences in attitudes from his interviews, but was unable, based on these interviews alone, to demonstrate statistically significant quantitative differences. To achieve this end, Moskos supplemented his interview data with questionnaire data. Not only can questionnaires provide some hard numbers to support qualitative data, they can also help researchers confirm the reliability of their own qualitative methods.

Summary

Deciding what type of interview to use and what aids can be brought to the interview depends on many factors: sensitivity of the topic, how familiar the interviewer is with the topic, and level of accuracy that is expected to be received from the interview, the nature of the interviewees, and the connection and interaction the researcher has established with the individuals to be interviewed.

Using technological aids depends mainly on the researcher. It is up to the individual researcher to decide if he or she can rely on pen and paper (and memory), and how technical measures will affect the interviewees and the data gathered. Using technology has its advantages but may also present the researcher with some unforeseen challenges that must be taken into consideration prior to the interview.

Corresponding with the different types of interviewing techniques are question types. Questions can be fully structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages and are appropriate to different types of research and research topics. Fully structured questions provide the researcher with data that is accurate and immediately ready for analysis. But sensitive and difficult topics, including most criminal justice and criminological research, require more flexibility from the interviewer and thus encourage the use of semi-structured and unstructured questions rather than fully structured interviews.

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