

Direct Interviewing and Eligibility Determination

In gathering of data of any kind, the preponderance of research indicates that face-to-face interviewing is far superior to other modes of inquiry. Besides providing opportunities for establishing greater rapport and going into more depth via probing and thoughtful exploration and responses to questioning, the interview allows for the securing of quality data (Borg, 1963, 221-233; Isaac and Michael, 1995, 145; Adams and Schvaneveldt, 1991, 212-213). Clarification of issues can occur readily and observations of interviewees, so essential in the communication process, ensues (Stewart and Cash, 1982). More flexible than employing the telephone or questionnaires, this format also enhances the motivation of respondents while controlling for factors not possible in mailings or over the phone (Monette et al., 2002, 182). And perhaps stating the obvious, researchers have determined, not surprisingly, that people simply relish talking (Adams, 1958; Converse and Schuman, 1974). As social creatures, then, humans are far more responsive to personal rather than impersonal interactions.

When it comes to the migrant population and the interview process, it is essential to note some of the uniqueness of this population. Monika Stodolska, an expert on immigration from the University of Illinois illustrates some of the challenges facing this community:

‘The goals of many of these migrants, at least initially, are not to settle down in the U.S., but instead to suspend their ‘normal’ lives for a limited period of time, to make as much money as possible, and to return to their home country. . . In reality. . . many never do return to Mexico, yet they cling to that idea, while struggling to get by in this country for years, and sometimes decades. Most never fully assimilate; instead, they remain in low-paying jobs, don’t learn to speak English or develop other new skills, live in substandard housing and limit their social and leisure activities for fear of attracting attention that could lead to their deportation’ (Mitchell, 2006, 1).

Any interviewer, then, needs to account for some of these distinguishing factors.

Proffering an ethnographic model of cross-cultural interviewing for social workers, Leigh maintains that seeing the interviewee as the 'expert' on their life situation is one road to actually hearing: "This method of interviewing sets forth ways of gathering information in a nonthreatening manner. The procedures discourage the social worker from giving 'meaning' to information and focus on learning about the other's cultural world through conversation" (Leigh, 1998, 12). While there are distinct differences between a social worker and an ID & R recruiter, the principle of thoughtfully encountering a human being with an often confounding set of circumstances will contribute to a more productive interaction for all parties.

There are other limitations and challenges posed in the interview process. Cost factors and time allocations are prominent in these discussions. For instance, the amount of time involved in locating potential clientele and traveling to these destinations are significantly resource consuming. One study found that approximately 40% of an interviewer's time was spent in traveling (Sudman, 1965). Still others discovered that interviewers spent only 35% of their time in face-to-face encounters while devoting 40% to determining the location of interviewees, 15% in getting to them, and 10% in administrative work such as recording and reviewing data (Moser and Kalton, 1972, 273). Time and cost constraints include moneys for transportation, interviewer hiring and training, questionnaire development and revising, making up schedules, and follow-up calls for rescheduling or re-interviews (Monette, 2002, 186). In a sample size of 520, Salant and Dillman found that the cost of a mail survey was \$7448, a telephone survey was \$9342, and a face-to-face survey was \$19,801 (Salant and Dillman, 1994, 46-49). Bear in mind that this data

is from 10 years ago and the costs would be higher in all areas. Evidently, soliciting data in this manner is not a cheap endeavor.

Interviewer bias is one of the primary disadvantages identified in the literature in this form of information gathering. Subjectivity, personal feelings, misinterpretations of either questionnaire material or respondent queries can be problematic along with the potential mismatches between the interviewer and respondent on the dimensions of age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class and other factors (Isaac and Michael, 1995, 145; Monette, 2002, 186). Neuman goes into some detail in his overview of such biases, noting the following areas: “1) errors by the respondent; 2) unintentional errors or interviewer sloppiness; 3) intentional subversion by the interviewer; 4) influence due to interviewer’s expectations about a respondent’s answers based on the respondent’s appearance, living situation, or other answers; 5) failure of an interviewer to probe or to probe properly; 6) influence on the answers due to the interviewer’s appearance, tone, attitude, reactions to answers, or comments made outside of the interview schedule” (Neuman, 1997, 259). Thus, mistakes by an interviewee could include memory lapses, failure to comprehend questions, embarrassment, or altering information because of the presence of others. An inept interviewer may contact the wrong individuals, misread a query, leave a pertinent piece of information out, incorrectly transcribe data, or simply misunderstand the person being interviewed. An unprincipled interviewer may deliberately alter responses, consciously omit or rephrase questions inappropriately, or select another respondent. Again, the expectations that an interviewer brings on how the interviewee will respond based on appearance, living circumstances, etc., can yield inaccurate information. At the same time, the respondent herself/himself may offer

inaccurate information due to the perception of the interviewer, e.g., verbal and nonverbal cues. A multitude of variables, then, can conspire to influence the accuracy of data which the researcher seeks.

Interviews fall into differing categories, depending upon the typologist. Drawing upon the work of others, Neuman, for instance, distinguished between an ordinary conversation and a structured survey interview (See **Appendix A**; Neuman, 1997, 256; Gorden, 1980, 19-25; Sudman and Bradburn, 1983, 5-10). Within the helping professions, interviews can be: 1) information gathering or social study interviews; 2) diagnostic, decision making interviews; or 3) therapeutic interviews (Kadushin, 1990, 12-13). Of relevance is the diagnostic interview as Kadushin elaborates:

“Another type of interview is geared toward appraisal and determination of eligibility for a service. These interviews facilitate definite administrative decisions. . . Although such interviews are highly individualized, they are conducted so as to permit the worker to assess some particular characteristics of the interviewee deemed essential for eligibility for a particular service or to justify some decision” (Kadushin, 1990, 12-13).

Analyzing data secured from the individual, then, the worker contributes to the decision by the organization relative to the fit for services. Determining the eligibility of migrant children for the Migrant Education Program, then, would fall under the diagnostic/decision making category since the purpose of this effort would be the determination of appropriateness for a particular service, embracing Kadushin’s categorization of social work interviewing.

Others would describe the interview as falling into differing structures, hence: 1) the unstructured interview; 2) the semistructured interview; 3) structured interviews (Isaac and Michael, 1995, 145). Employing the techniques of Carl Rogers, the unstructured interview provides the respondent with the greatest freedom of response and time without

the imposition of a particular format. Not uncommonly, exploration will involve sensitive and volatiles areas (e.g., sexual practices or beliefs, alcohol use). Of all the interview types, this one is most prone to subjectivity and error (Isaac and Michael, 1995, 145). Within the framework of the semistructured interview, there is a set of specific questions from which the interviewer is free to probe and develop responses that would not emerge in response to more straight forward inquiry. The researchers note, however, the attendant issues: “Semistructured interviews require more training and skill both to probe at significant points and to avoid biasing tendencies” (Isaac and Michael, 1995, 145). Finally, the structured interview encompasses the following as manifested in this description:

“The interviewer follows a well-defined structure resembling the format of an objective questionnaire, allowing clarification and elaboration within narrow limits. These tend to be factually oriented, aimed at specific information, and relatively brief. Structured interviews are suitable when accurate and complete information from all respondents is important and when the type of information sought fits readily into a structured inquiry” (Isaac and Michael, 1995, 145).

The Certificate of Eligibility and the goal of ascertaining specific and accurate facts suggest that this category, along with the aspects of the semistructured interview, has relevance for the ID & R process.

Similarly, other social researchers organize interviews in this manner: 1) the focused interview; 2) the nondirective interview; 3) the clinical interview (Adams and Schvaneveldt, 1991, 214-217). Extrapolating from the work of Merton et al. (1956), Adams and Schvaneveldt describe the nature and function of the focused interview which has pertinence for the eligibility determination process:

“The wording of the questions is not strictly specified, but the interview is nevertheless focused since information is sought on an area experienced by the respondent. The interviewer comes to the situation with goals in mind, objectives

to be attained, and the questions to be used in accomplishing these purposes. The researcher is informed and knowledgeable about the focus of the interview and this enables the interviewer to guide, direct, and interpret the process to achieve the express purpose of the focused interview, namely, to focus research attention on the background and experience of the respondent as related to the purposes of the study. . . The interviewer's knowledge about the situation under study coupled with information about a specific respondent's experience enables the interviewer to guide the interview to achieve certain purposes" (Adams and Schvaneveldt, 1991, 214-215).

In the description of the focused interview, then, researchers highlight the nature of specific information being sought from the respondent as well as the fact that respondents were primarily selected due to certain preferred characteristics. The eligibility interview with migrant families is certainly focused in nature under this rubric.

Whether termed diagnostic, structured, or focused, the interviewing protocol in the determination of migrant family eligibility for education services differs from other forms of research interviews that might require less structure, more observation, and greater indirect probes. The ID & R effort is more than studying a particular population or administering a survey. The ultimate goal is one which ends up in the determination of a particular service, ascertained only by the accuracy of the information solicited in the interaction between interviewer and respondent.

Since a primary goal in the interview process is to elicit accurate information, it is evident that the role of the interviewer is critical. Within the context of the Migrant Education Program, this individual (aka recruiter) is, in fact, the gatekeeper to the entire program. The importance of this function cannot be understated. What, then, might the prerequisite traits be for a person in this position? The litany of characteristics is both lengthy and daunting. In addition to being knowledgeable and experienced (yes, the best interviewers are intelligent and savvy), the interviewers must be flexible, warm, and

structured (Kadushin, 1990, 75-77). Citing a variety of research on traits, Kadushin details the attributes in this way:

“. . . those interviewers who manifest the personal qualities associated with establishing a good relationship—warmth, patience, compassion, tolerance, sincerity—are likely to be among the more successful . . . The less anxious, less maladjusted the interviewer is, the greater the likelihood of competence . . . Greater interview competence is associated with open-mindedness and low dogmatism . . . Other studies of the characteristics of competent interviewers suggest that they have a rather reserved, controlled, low-level social orientation and retain a certain amount of detached sensitivity to the interviewee. They are serious, persistent, reflective, and interested in observing and understanding their own behavior as well as the behavior of others, and they are tolerant and understanding of other people and human weakness. One recurrent finding is that a high degree of extroversion and sociability is not related to high interview competence. Greater interview competence tends to be associated with an interest in people that is scientific and objective rather than highly emotional or personal” (Kadushin, 1990, 75).

The plethora of desirable qualities in the interviewer speaks to the importance of their task.

Other research speaks to the descriptive features of the interviewer, viz., her or his physical and social characteristics. The above-mentioned aspects of age, sex, ethnicity, and class are all factors that may impact the nature and outcome of the interview. Studies find that the greater the match between interviewer and interviewee on these dimensions, the greater the success in interaction with respondents (Monette, 2002, 182). For example, Hispanics and Anglos in Texas responded to questions on bilingualism differently, depending upon whether the interviewer was Anglo or Hispanic (Reese et al., 1986). Additionally, the physical appearance (neat and clean) as well as attendant behaviors (friendly and business-like) are pertinent (Monette, 2002, 182). As innocuous as it may seem, dress and grooming impact interview outcomes as one researcher notes:

“The goal in presenting the self should be that of making a good impression, or appearing neutral, to complement or blend into the setting of the interview, and to

invite people to help you in your goal of getting the information necessary to make the interview successful. Any part of dress or presentation of self that runs the risk of causing people to form inappropriate impressions of you and your task should be avoided” (Adams and Schvaneveldt, 1991, 219).

It is also noted that the interview process takes place in context which can affect the outcome of responses. Who is present is one piece of this. In the presence of the husband, Aquilino (1993) discovered that wives responded to questions differently not only on the amount of housework done (they inflated his share) but also on the impact of divorce and separation (they maintained that they would be in worse condition). Interestingly, they also detailed marital spats and cohabitation prior to marriage when their husbands were present. On the other hand, the presence of small children made no difference in responses of a parent in the interview process (Neuman, 1997, 259).

This is a very cursory review of some of the many dimensions of an interview process that determines the eligibility of migrant children for educational services. Adams and Schvaneveldt capture the complex and simple nature of this effort:

“If the setting is appropriate, the respondent motivated and willing, the interviewer skilled, and the instrument well prepared, the interview has the potential to be an extremely sensitive device for the acquisition of reliable and valid data” (212).

At best, then, careful attention to these details is the beginning of an arduous but worthwhile effort. Successfully identifying migrant children who qualify for much needed educational services is a noble goal.

Appendix A

Ordinary Conversation

1. Questions and answers from each participant are relatively equally balanced.
2. There is an open Exchange of feelings and opinions.
3. Judgments are stated and attempts made to persuade the other of a particular points of view.
4. A person can reveal deep inner feelings to gain sympathy or as a therapeutic release.
5. Ritual responses are common (e.g., “Uh huh), shaking head, “How are you?” “Fine”).
6. The participants exchange information and correct the factual errors that they are aware of.
7. Topics rise and fall and either person can introduce new topics, the focus can shift directions or digress to less relevant issues.
8. The emotional tone can shift from humor,, to joy, to affection, to sadness, to anger, and so on.
9. People can evade or ignore questions and give flippant or noncommittal answers.

Adapted from Gorden (1980: 19 -25) and Sudman and Bradburn (1983:5-10)

The Survey Interview

1. Interviewer asks and respondent answers most of the time.]
2. Only the respondent reveals feelings and opinions.
3. Interviewer is nonjudgmental and does not try to change respondent’s opinions or beliefs.
4. Interview tries to obtain direct answers to specific questions.
5. Interviewer avoids making ritual responses that influence a respondent and also seeks genuine answers’, not ritual responses.

6. Respondent provides almost all information. Interviewer does not correct a respondent's factual errors.
 7. Interviewer controls the topic, directions, and pace. He or she keeps the respondent "on task", and irrelevant diversions are contained.
 8. Interviewer attempts to maintain a consistently warm but serious and objective tone throughout.
- Respondent should not evade questions and should give truthful, thoughtful, answers

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16. Interviewer attempts to maintain a consistently warm but serious and objective tone throughout.
17. Respondent should not evade questions and should give truthful, thoughtful, answers.

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