

Littlejohn, Andrew. 1988. 'How to fail interviews'. In Littlejohn, Andrew and Mohammed Melouk. *Research Methods and Processes*. Pp 67- 75. Lancaster: Lancaster University.

## HOW TO FAIL INTERVIEWS

ANDREW LITTLEJOHN

When I first began doing research, one of the things that struck me most was the way in which 'seasoned' researchers continually talked of 'getting data'. They would ask questions like "Have you got your data yet?" or "Where are you going to get your data from?" and I began to form an impression of data as something which one might conceivably get through a mail order catalogue or perhaps dig out of the ground when you were "out in the field". The hardest thing, it appeared, was to find some "good data" and to extract it from its surroundings without "polluting" it or "distorting" it too much. To be a researcher, it seemed, one had to adopt a certain type of behaviour and talk about the world in a particular way, distinct from 'normal' ways of talking.

Now, for the novice researcher, one of the hardest concepts to grasp - and apply - is the notion of *representativeness*. That is, that the data one manages to collect is *representative* of the larger population from which it comes. Researchers themselves have devices for confirming representativeness, notably 'triangulation', in which three or more methods are used to extract the same data (e.g. questionnaires, interviews and observation). Recently, however, I have become concerned about the very notion of there existing 'data', particularly interview data, which actually *allows* generalisations to be made.

The key problem, it seems, is the way that, through a sense of detachment, social science researchers feel able to isolate or separate 'data' from the total situation in which it occurs and thereby typify human behaviour on the basis of the very small fragment upon which they have chosen to focus. The origins of my uneasiness about 'data' go back to a particular experience I had when, in common with other researchers, I set collecting my own data. The episode in question forms a very useful illustration of the discussion in the latter part of this paper so I will endeavour to recount it for the reader.

## Collecting Data: An Account

The primary focus of my present research is the design of materials for teaching English as a foreign language. For one part of this, I wanted to collect the views of authors on the materials that they had written. I initially thought I would use a questionnaire but after considering the pros and cons (see, on this, Slembrouck, this volume) and my own experience of filling in others' questionnaires, I felt it would be better to interview my subjects - especially as it became increasingly obvious that only a small number of writers were willing to talk to me. Those that answered positively to my letters I telephoned to see when we could meet. My first two such calls went without any problems. The next one, however, was not so easy. It went something like this.

(MW = materials writer; AL = Andrew Littlejohn. 'Peter' is a pseudonym)

AL: Oh hello, this is Andrew Littlejohn. I'm just ringing to make an appointment to meet.

MW: What do you mean you're just ringing to make an appointment. Who the hell do you think you are? I mean I've just come back from Greece and the ministry there says they're not going to buy my books any more and I find all this junk mail from you.

AL: Oh dear. I'm sorry. Well, if you feel you'd rather not -

MW: I mean what is it that you want from us? What's wrong with you people in Lancaster? Some people have got work to do you know. We can't spend all day filling in your bloody grids. Now come on Andrew, this is the real world.

AL: Well, I don't want to force it on you -

MW: What do you mean you don't want to force it on me? You're damn right you're not going to. I've seen enough Lancaster MAs to know how you can waste our time.

AL: Actually, I'm not doing the MA, Peter.

MW: Well why the hell are you hounding me?

AL: Well, if I can explain. I've sent the same letter that I sent you to a number of other authors and -

MW: I know you have! They're all my friends, that's why! Most of them have been more sensible than me. They put it straight in the bin. Now what the hell do you want?

AL: Well, can I explain Peter?

MW: Be quick. I'm going out in a minute.

AL: Well, I'm trying to get a picture of how materials writers view the classroom -

MW: Well why the hell don't you read our teacher's books?

AL: Can I explain?

MW: Yes, sorry. Go on.

AL: Right. I'm a research student and -

MW: Who's your supervisor?  
 AL: Mike Breen.  
 MW: Mike Breen. That's all right I suppose.  
 AL: Peter?  
 MW: Yes?  
 AL: Can I explain what I'm doing?  
 MW: Yes, Go on.  
 AL: Right, as I said, I'm...

The conversation went on in more or less the same confrontationist manner for about half an hour or so, leaving me, as you would imagine, rather dazed. Then, as I began to take stock of what had happened, I realised that the telephone conversation in itself pointed to a much neglected, although on reflection, obvious fact: *that interviewees and questionnaire respondents may themselves have an opinion of what it is that we are trying to do and that this opinion is inseparable from the data that we are trying to gather from them.* It became clear to me that, to the author on the telephone, I was not just some anonymous individual who wanted to talk to him. No; I stirred up in him a number of preconceived views that he had about the nature and value of 'Research' in general and about Lancaster and the people there in particular.

The experience recounted above set me thinking about *interviewee's* perceptions of research and I decided to investigate a little further. My first step was to go back to those people on whom I had piloted my interview techniques. Through, talking to them, I was able to formulate some questions that may be going through an *interviewee's* mind as we try to gather data from him/her. I have arrived at these questions very informally and there are definitely a lot missing, but I think they point to a need to look at data collection devices such as interviews more thoroughly before we endeavour to state our 'findings'. Appendix 1 summarises these questions but in what follows I will attempt to describe them more fully.

### Interviewee's Questions

A first general question in the interviewee's mind comes over very clearly in the telephone script above. This is:

Who am I talking to?

To which we can add two further questions:

- What does he represent?<sup>1</sup>

- What does he think about me and what I do?

For the person on the telephone, for example, I represented Lancaster and thus fell within his general view of the value of what he believed goes on at the University; he reacted not to *me* ringing him, but to *Lancaster* ringing him.

There are a number of further questions which come under this general area. In looking at the transcripts of some of the interviews which I did manage to conduct, the interviewees concern with how he or she appears is particularly evident. In a number of cases, the interviewee reformulates what he or she said, hardening or softening the point made. In other cases, there are definite attempts to discover where I, as interviewer, stand on certain issues before the interviewee expresses his/her own position. Questions such as "Well, what do you think about it?" or "Apart from the fact that you're doing research, why do you ask?" indicate attempts to test the ground before the interviewee puts his/her own opinion on record. These attempts point to a number of further questions which we can add to those above:

- How is he going to judge what I say?
- What does he already know about me?
- How do I appear as I talk?

The next general question that may be running through the interviewee's mind relates to the *purpose of the interview*:

Why is he talking to me?

That is: Why me? with perhaps a nagging suspicion that there is more to this than meets the eye:

- *Exactly what* is the purpose of our conversation?
- Why have I been chosen?

One of my interviewees, for instance, revealed to me that he thought that I had been given his name and the names of some other authors by a person in his publishing house who was responsible for closing down a unit he worked for and that this person had done this with the intention of annoying him. It seemed too much of a coincidence to him that, of all the authors that wrote for that particular publisher, only the ones in the now defunct unit were approached by me. (What, however, he had not

appreciated was that, with that particular publisher, he and his ex-colleagues were the only ones who wrote the kind of materials I was investigating.) Nevertheless, as I spoke to him, it would seem likely that the following questions would have been uppermost in his mind:

- Have I been categorised in some way that has not been disclosed to me?
- Who else has he or is he going to talk to? Should I be concerned about how I appear relative to other interviewees?
- What does he expect me to say?

A third main question relates to *how* the interview itself is going to be conducted. This is:

How am I required to express myself?

Uncertain of the role of 'interviewee', the person concerned may feel unsure of the relevance of what he/she is going to say and uncomfortable with the options (such as multiple choice statements) which the interviewer provides. In some cases, this uncomfortableness will result in outright rejection. The person in the telephone script above, for example, flatly refused to complete a grid that I had sent him and which I attempted to use as a means of 'standardising' my interviews. There was no way, however, in which he was going to let me impose what he saw as an 'unnatural' frame on our conversation, although he was, in the end, quite willing to talk to me. Interviewees will, of course, vary in the way in which they react to the initiative of the interviewer, but as the discussions with my pilot interviewees revealed, their reactions will hinge on a number of key issues:

- Am I expected to express myself in his terms or in my own? What are the 'rules of the game'?
- Who controls the conversation? Him? Me? When should I stop talking?
- Is this a 'normal' conversation?

The last question above is particularly significant. One of my pilot interviewees, for instance, said he found our conversation most uncomfortable because I was not 'giving away' as much as one would in normal conversation. I was always turning his answers in on themselves by saying "Why do you say that?" or "What do you mean when you say

X?", never giving my own opinion. I, of course, was desperately trying not to "pollute" my data by putting words in his mouth or leading him on. He, however, said that it felt like being on a psychiatrist's couch, and after a while he did not want to talk further.

The last main question I have identified relates to a feeling of exposure from which interviewees may suffer. With so much uncertainty over where interviewees stand and the kind of event they are actually party to, interviewees will almost certainly become preoccupied with the following:

What is he going to do with what I say?

Quite rightly, some of my interviewees wanted to know what was going to happen with the recordings that I made and how I intended to analyse them. For them the following questions were clearly relevant:

- What does he really think about what I have said? Am I going to be criticised?
- How is he going to analyse it?
- Who is going to read what is written about me? Will it be possible to identify me in his thesis?
- Can the research have any negative consequences for me?

This concern with the *outcome* of the interview would obviously have a bearing on what the interviewee would say, perhaps more so than any of the other questions listed above. It is, after all, only *after* the interview that the consequences of what has been said become clear.

## Conclusion

The final question I have is for ourselves, the researchers. Simply put, this is:

What can we do about all this?

Obviously, the presence of doubts or preconceived ideas in the minds of interviewees will have considerable bearing on what they actually say. The data that we gather, therefore, may be so tightly located in the situation that existed at the time of the interview that any attempt to generalise from what was said and make claims about the general nature

of a particular person's views must be seriously questioned. At best, such attempts would appear folly; at worst, reckless, given the usual attempts to formulate 'implications' or 'recommendations' in the final part of many research projects.

One common approach taken by researchers to avoid the problems of 'interviewee's perceptions of the interview' is to set up a decoy. That is, they make frank, but dishonest, statements about the purpose of the interview in order to avoid defensiveness on the part of the interviewee. Researchers in the main seem happy with this device, but I myself have doubts about how far the nature and course of an interview may detract from the stated purpose and still fool the interviewee. The danger, I believe, is that we may simply be adding a further layer of uncertainty for the interviewee, making it still harder to be confident of the 'generalisable' nature of what is said.

But the situation is not entirely hopeless. A more fruitful avenue is to assume that the interviewee will have his/her own opinions on what is happening in the interview, and, in analysing the transcript, the researcher may attempt to "read between the lines", looking out for evidence of the interviewee's adjustments to being interviewed. To do this, I have adopted a number of procedures in my own work, which may be of use to other researchers using interviews or related devices. They are:

- 1 Try to define exactly how the respondent sees you, the researcher, and what it is that you are up to. Also try to formulate some hypotheses about how this may affect what the respondent says.
- 2 When making claims about what the respondent says, indicate where exactly in the transcript there is evidence for this. Reflect on precisely what it is about what is said that leads you to a particular interpretation. How far does your interpretation derive from the particular choice of words, intonation, gesture and so on?
- 3 When abstract, global concepts are referred to by the respondent (e.g. terms such as 'freedom', 'discipline', 'control'), try to define, from the transcript as a whole, what those concepts mean to the respondent.
- 4 Also, try to define what those global concepts personally mean for you, the researcher, and what your 'position' may be in relation to those concepts (e.g. Do you see them as 'good' or 'bad'? 'desirable' or 'undesirable'?).

It is then, in *interpretation* rather than in *reporting* that the real work of the social science researcher lies. By adopting procedures such as those

above, this interpretative work may be carried out more visibly, making explicit the judgements which the researcher makes, thereby leaving the reader free to take perhaps a different view of things.

One final point I would like to make concerns the common assumption in social science research that there actually exist definable 'perceptions', 'views' or 'opinions'. It would seem obvious that the kind of adjustments which interviewees make is not a feature unique to interviews. It forms a central part in *any* conversation. As interlocutors, we always monitor the response to what we say, building up a conversation, 'brick by brick'. 'Perceptions', 'views' and 'opinions', therefore, do not exist as 'thing-like entities'; they are fluid, changing, like aameleon, according to the social location<sup>2</sup>. Data, then, which actually permits generalisations about respondents' views may simply not exist.

## Notes

- 1 Throughout this discussion of interviewee's questions, I refer to the interviewer as 'he', 'him', and 'his'. This is because, in formulating these questions I was thinking of the interviewees' perception of me, but I would certainly expect the same to be true for any female interviewer as well.
- 2 See, for example, Berger and Luckman (1966) and Circourel (1964) on this.

## Appendix

### *Summary of Interviewee's Questions*

#### 1 WHO AM I TALKING TO?

- What does he represent?
- What does he think about me and what I do?
- How is he going to judge what I say?
- What does he already know about me?
- How do I appear as I talk?

#### 2 WHY IS HE TALKING TO ME?

- *Exactly what* is the purpose of our conversation?
- Why have I been chosen?
- Have I been categorised in some way that has not been disclosed to me?
- Who else has he or is he going to talk to? Should I be concerned about how I appear relative to other interviewees?
- What does he expect me to say?



### 3 HOW AM I REQUIRED TO EXPRESS MYSELF?

- Am I expected to express myself in his terms or in my own? What are the 'rules of the game'?
- Who controls the conversation? Him? Me? When should I stop talking?
- Is this a 'normal' conversation?

### 4 WHAT IS HE GOING TO DO WITH WHAT I SAY?

- What does he really think about what I have said? Am I going to be criticised?
- How is he going to analyse it?
- Who is going to read what is written about me? Will it be possible to identify me in his thesis?
- Can the research have any negative consequences for me?