

The systematic collection of interviewers' incidental observations: A cost-effective way to make surveys more informative

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Introduction

Survey interviewers and their respondents rarely confine themselves to the script set out in the questionnaire. Interviewers ask extra questions to smooth transitions or to demonstrate an interest in what the respondent is saying.

Respondents give unexpectedly detailed answers or wander off into new topics. Interviews generally take place in respondents' homes, so interviewers are able to see how respondents live and how they interact with their families and neighbours. Through struggling to deliver confusing or ambiguous questions, interviewers also acquire a feeling for the survey's validity. All this means that interviewers pick up a great deal of incidental information related to the survey.

This information is potentially very valuable to researchers. Stray comments from respondents can throw light on puzzles in the data, and knowledge of which questions confused respondents can help researchers make sense of strange answers. Typically, however, little of the incidental information finds its way into the final report.

In a recent research project on health services for elderly Thais (Bryant and Prohmmo 2001; Bryant and Prohmmo, Forthcoming), we experimented with methods of making sure that the incidental data would not be wasted. One method was to encourage interviewers to write comments in the margins of the questionnaires, which we entered into our data base. The other method was to hold focus groups with the interviewers at the end of each day, which we recorded, transcribed, and analysed. Neither of these methods is very revolutionary: many questionnaires already have sections at the end for interviewers to write comments (ORC Macro 2001), and many researchers already have informal conversations with interviewers about their work. We have simply tried to build on these practices and make them more systematic. In this paper we describe the two methods and discuss their strengths and weaknesses, with illustrations from our research project.

Description of the methods

Our questionnaires had large margins which we told the interviewers to fill with comments. We encouraged comments summarising remarks made by respondents or recording anything else noticed by the interviewers. If, for instance, a respondent answered a question on whether she had a free health care card, and then went on to describe favouritism in the issuing process, the interviewer was supposed to write down the remarks about the favouritism as well as the answer about the card. We also told interviewers that if they were unsure whether a respondent's answer fitted into the available options, they should describe the answer in a note. If, for instance, a respondent answered a question on a free health care card by saying that she had recently lost her card, the interviewer was supposed to write down 'recently lost card', rather than just circling one of the 'has card' or 'does not have card' options on the questionnaire.

We also tried to use comments in the margins to address a particular issue which we thought could not be addressed sensitively through an ordinary survey

question. We wished to know whether old people believed that members of a free health care scheme for civil servants received better quality care than members of the schemes for ordinary people. We did not, however, want to put this into our questionnaire, because we were worried that asking indiscriminately might undermine people's confidence in the local health care facilities. What we did instead was to tell interviewers to pursue the issue only if it arose naturally out of conversation, and if the old person seemed comfortable discussing it. Any opinions offered by the respondents were to be recorded in the margins.

All the notes in the margins were entered into the same database as we used for the ordinary survey data. Our research assistant entered all comments verbatim, and we then went through to review and summarize. As we were beginning each new round of the survey we re-emphasized to the interviewers the importance of the comments, and cited examples of comments which we had found useful.

Our second method was to hold focus group discussions with the interviewers. The discussions took place away from the survey sites and typically lasted about an hour. We finished the interviewing sufficiently early each day so that the interviewers still had enough energy to take part in the discussions. We usually began by asking about difficulties administering the questionnaire. We then went through a list of pre-set topics, and asked interviewers for any additional observations.

Our research assistant taped and transcribed the discussions. We read through the transcripts and extracted the useful information. The process of reading and extracting information was faster than it would be for ordinary focus groups, since we were not looking at group dynamics or the interviewers' underlying motives and understanding.

Strengths and weaknesses of the methods

The comments and focus groups did, as we had hoped, provide some information on matters which we had not included in the questionnaire. We learnt, for instance, about local health problems, and about respondents' reasons for consulting private clinics in preference to public hospitals. Typical comments from the margins, once summarized, were as follows:

Has gout. Obtains medicine from private clinic. Goes to clinic once a week. Cost is 120 baht per visit.

Has sore, swollen legs, but doesn't go to hospital because it's not convenient. Goes to clinic instead, or buys cream to put on legs.

Typical notes from the focus groups were:

Old person complained that at government hospitals people who 'have a name' go to the front of the queue and get better treatment.

One poor old person very happy to get free treatment. Happy with quality of care. Wishes they had some money so they could make a donation to the hospital.

The value of the information was limited in several ways. As the examples above illustrate, few of the observations, whether from the comments or the focus groups, were either detailed or profound. We told the interviewers not to ask leading questions and not to put words into peoples' mouths. Unfortunately, some of the interviewers clearly found this advice hard to follow, which reduced the value of the contributions they made.

It was also impossible to estimate the prevalence of any practices or attitudes which were reported. There were never enough comments in margins to estimate frequencies directly. During the focus groups, interviewers often made claims about certain phenomena being common or uncommon. It quickly became apparent, however, that the interviewers were not reporting generalisations made by respondents, but were forming their own generalisations based on the small number of respondents they had themselves interviewed. (Researchers are often prone to the same mistake.)

Our experiment with using comments in margins to assess people's views about differences between schemes was not particularly successful, as we obtained only 17 usable comments from a total of 733 respondents. The exercise was not, however, completely pointless. Before the survey we had assumed that the rich would be much more critical than the poor about the quality of care offered through the ordinary scheme. The 17 comments showed no such association, reducing our confidence in our assertion and prompting us to venture no opinions about differences between rich and poor.

Although they were only moderately successful at generating information on new topics, the comments in the margins and the focus groups turned out to be quite useful for clarifying and illuminating responses in the questionnaires. A typical example was the interviewer who recorded that a respondent had paid a 50-baht fee on a recent visit to the local health centre, and then added a note to say that the fee was for an injection. In the focus group at the end of the day, the interviewer explained that health centre staff gave patients the choice of having the medicine orally, which cost nothing, or as an injection, which cost 50 baht. Many interviewers wrote notes to explain outliers: if a respondent had been to the doctor unusually often, for instance, the interviewer would typically say what illness the respondent had been suffering from.

With encouragement from us, the interviewers became quite good at amending set responses which did not do justice to the respondents' answers. For instance, many interviewers filled out the survey question on whether the respondent belonged to the local old person's association by circling the 'no' response and then adding a note stating that the respondent did belong to the local funeral society, or to the local savings cooperative. We sometimes allocated a new code to the unanticipated responses, or altered our interpretation of the data. But even when we ignored the notes, as with the funeral societies and savings cooperatives, they still served an important purpose, as they allowed us, rather than the interviewers, to make the final interpretive choices. This increased consistency between different interviewers, and improved the overall validity of the survey.

We obtained a great deal of information on the validity of the survey from the focus groups, as the interviewers needed little prompting to tell us which questions were confusing or difficult to administer. The interviewers were also keen to let us know how the questionnaire could have been improved. Talking through these issues added considerably to the interviewers' understanding of the questionnaire and its aims, which made them better at administering it.

Although only the more experienced and talented interviewers were enthusiastic about writing notes in the margins, everyone seemed to enjoy the focus groups. Survey interviewing is nearly always stressful, and is generally interesting, so that the interviewers were usually glad to discuss their experiences. Most interviewers were also glad to be consulted on their opinions, and to be treated as members of the research team. Keeping the interviewers happy is more important than might be thought. It is generally impossible to supervise interviewers closely during fieldwork, so the only way to be reasonably sure they will go into unwelcoming households, probe ambiguities, and otherwise minimize biases and omissions, is to maintain high morale.

A final, crucial strength of the notes in the margins and the focus groups is that they require little extra time or resources to implement. Providing that the data entry program is reasonably flexible, the entry and coding of the notes can be done at the same time as the entry and coding of the ordinary survey responses. If the research project includes some qualitative data collection, then the transcription and analysis of the focus groups can be carried out at the same time as the processing of the qualitative data.

The two methods have the least to offer in cases where the researchers are highly familiar with the survey site and where the questionnaire has been through several rounds of pre-testing and improvement. Even in this ideal case, however, discussions at the end of each day may be useful as a way of enhancing the understanding and morale of the interviewers. The methods have the most to offer in cases, such as rapid rural appraisals, in which the survey needs to be constructed and administered quickly and cheaply.

References

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