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GESIS Survey Guidelines

Interviewer Skills and Training

Angelika Stiegler & Nicole Biedinger

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Abstract

"Interviewers affect survey estimates in three ways: They play a major role in the response rate that is achieved, they are responsible for training and motivating respondents, and they must handle their part of the interview interaction and question-and-answer process in a standardized, nonbiasing way" (Fowler, 2014: 110).

Survey techniques that require the use of interviewers necessarily presuppose the recruitment and training of these staff. Regardless of whether potential interviewers are to conduct face-to-face or telephone interviews, they play one of the two key roles in the interview situation – namely, to motivate the target person to participate in the survey, and to collect data within the framework of the interview. Because the interviewer influences the respondent's willingness to participate and his response behaviour, [1] it must be ensured that this influence is "on track". Hence, to minimise interviewer effects, special attention should be paid to the selection, training, and motivation of the interviewers, as the quality of the fieldwork, and thus the quality of the data, depends decisively on the participating actors. Thus, the optimisation of data quality begins with the selection of the interviewers, continues during interviewer training, and ends with interviewer monitoring. The present contribution addresses the following questions:

- What should be taken into consideration when recruiting interviewers?
- What type of training should be conducted?
- What quality assurance and quality control measures can be implemented?

Citation

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[1] Here, and in what follows, the masculine pronoun is used for the sake of readability. It refers both to female and male actors.

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1. What should be taken into consideration when recruiting interviewers?

Interviewers are the people who make contact with respondents and decisively influence both their willingness to participate and the quality of the data collected. For this reason, special attention must be paid to interviewer recruitment, as not everyone has what it takes to conduct interviews.

The following closer look at interviewer recruitment standards focuses on independently building up a small staff of interviewers – for example, for deployment in just one project – rather than on the standards employed by professional/commercial survey institutes. This perspective gives rise to the following main questions:

1.1. How does recruitment take place?

Whether the aim is to build up a temporary or a permanent staff of interviewers with low or high fluctuation, the most common methods of seeking and finding suitable applicants are (a) notices on notice boards at central institutions (e.g., universities, administrations, etc.) and (b) newspaper advertisements and online job advertisements, for example on the website of the researcher's own institute or in appropriate online portals. The snowball effect of word-of-mouth recommendation should not be underestimated either. However, it takes a while to get going.

The mode in which the planned survey is to be conducted undoubtedly has a decisive influence on the recruitment and selection of applicants. For example, if a telephone survey is planned, it makes sense to provide (only) a telephone number for the initial contact in notices and advertisements aimed at addressing people from all age groups and social classes. This is because telephone contact immediately gives a first impression of the applicant's voice and behaviour on the telephone.

This initial telephone contact is followed by a personal interview, in the course of which the prerequisites for the job can be explained and, in particular, the applicant's suitability for the role of interviewer can be assessed. When recruiting people to conduct face-to-face interviews, the applicant's appearance, mode of dress, and other striking characteristics play a much greater role than is the case when recruiting telephone interviewers. However, these aspects cannot be assessed until the said personal interview.

Applicants who receive a positive assessment are invited to take part in so-called basic training, in the course of which essential and interesting information about conducting interviews is imparted. This knowledge is then practised, checked, and improved in mock interviews. Potential interviewers who have successfully participated in the basic training then take part in a further training session where they are informed about the specifics of the survey project in question and its methodology.

Recruitment and training are not separate processes, but rather go hand in hand. Hence, at each stage in the multi-stage selection process, there is a chance that a candidate will not be successful and will be eliminated.

1.2. Who should I select?

There are a number of minimum requirements that (new) interviewers must fulfil. Besides communicative characteristics, such as the ability to make contact with people and to speak in a clearly structured, task-oriented, and fluent way, they include the ability to grasp things quickly, a good general education, a friendly manner, and social skills. Other essential prerequisites are a willingness to learn, flexibility of hours, and, of course, basic computer skills and mobility.

When selecting applicants for the job as telephone interviewer, particular attention should be paid to the "admission ticket" to telephone interviewing – the person's voice – because the medium through which respondents are contacted and interviews are conducted is the telephone. Both actors in the interview situation (the respondent and the interviewer) have only this acoustic channel at their disposal. It is important, therefore, that the interviewer have a pleasant voice and be able to use it in the right way. Telephone interviews may be conducted either from a telephone survey laboratory or from the interviewer's own phone, and this, too, can play a role during the selection process. When selecting interviewers for face-to-face interviews, selection criteria include visual factors, such as a well-groomed appearance. And in order to be able to contact respondents in person, interviewers must be mobile.

Most of the aforementioned characteristics – and other characteristics that should be mentioned, such as reliability, motivation, and productivity – can be better, or properly, assessed only in the course of time. Generally speaking, account should also be taken of the survey topic and the demands of the project, as they can cause specific interviewer effects (e.g., in the case of surveys of migrant groups, it is helpful to use interviewers who have the same migration background).

1.3. What other requirements should be taken into consideration when selecting interviewers?

1.3.1. Structure of the staff of interviewers

Depending on the survey technique and the research question, a number of different factors should be taken into consideration when selecting interviewers. These factors may include, for example, sample size, survey type, regional distribution, time and duration of the survey, budget, and language. In the case of youth surveys, for example, young interviewers should be selected. Particularly in the case of complex project requirements, it is helpful to have people with different personalities – and, where required, from different backgrounds – on the team of interviewers. This enables the targeted deployment of interviewers for specific respondent groups (e.g., because Turkish women prefer to be interviewed by a woman, the interviewing staff should not comprise only men; Baykara-Krumme 2010). In the case of a permanent "core staff" of interviewers, all age groups should be represented and, if possible, gender distribution should be balanced. In practice, however, it is not always that easy – indeed it is sometimes almost impossible – to recruit the desired (number of) interviewers. This holds true for all the aforementioned types of survey techniques. "Borrowing" interviewers with basic training from commercial survey institutes may possibly be an additional option.

1.3.2. Cultural background

A number of studies have shown that the cultural context should be taken into account both when selecting and training interviewers and when conducting the survey (Baykara-Krumme 2010). The cultural context manifests itself, for example, in the fact that attitudes to surveys differ across countries (Blom et al., 2011).

In most cases, interviewers and respondents come from the same cultural context. However, some research questions specifically address migrants, and some projects are conducted in many different countries. In such cases, it should be noted that Western customs (e.g., shaking hands when greeting someone, or looking someone in the eye when talking) may be wrongly interpreted in other cultures and may even lead to refusals. This should be taken into account when selecting, training, and deploying interviewers (see Blom, 2010; Christopher et al., 2005).

1.3.3. Size of the staff of interviewers

With regard to the size of the staff of interviewers, Schell (2012) recommends that at least two or three times as many interviewers should be recruited as are initially required, or estimated to be required, because interviewer absences must always be expected. In the case of telephone interviews, the number of interviewers recruited should be at least twice as high as the number of telephone places available in the telephone survey laboratory. To calculate the capacity available, and to determine the number of interviewers required for a survey conducted with computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), the number of interviews to be conducted, the duration of the interviews, the number of contact attempts possible, and the daily working hours (shifts) should be factored in, taking into account the maximum weekly working hours of each interviewer. Moreover, the larger the staff of interviewers, the greater the possibility of assigning individual interviewers with specific characteristics to the appropriate respondents in a targeted way and of avoiding interviewer effects that may occur when individual interviewers conduct a large number of interviews. However, a large staff of interviewers entails greater organisational and coordination effort.

2. What type of training should be conducted?

Intensive training is indispensable as it helps to significantly minimise data collection errors. Hence, the quality of the resulting data decisively depends on the quality of the general and project-specific training provided (Billiet & Loosveldt, 1988).

A training sequence can be roughly divided into a general and a project-specific part. In addition to more theoretical content, for example a PowerPoint presentation on the general rules of conducting standardised interviews, a practical part in the form of mock interviews and/or role play should be included. Conducting additional mock interviews in the most realistic situations possible under the guidance of a supervisor is even better. In this way, the interviewer can be given important feedback about his behaviour. All potential interviewers, irrespective of whether they wish to do the job once or on a more permanent basis, must undergo this type of training if they are to be able to work as an interviewer in the first place. However, even experienced (i.e., trained) interviewers should definitely undergo the basic training once again when they start work with another institution or another project – not only to refresh or revise existing knowledge but also to familiarise themselves with the respective standards or procedures.

The entire interviewer training often lasts a whole working day and is absolutely essential (Schnell et al. 2011: 328f.). The timeframe ranges from one to several days, depending on the survey mode, the standard of quality aspired to, and, not least, the financial resources available. One thing applies to all types of training: It should take place as near as possible to the date when the fieldwork is due to begin. For if there is a long time lapse between training and the onset of fieldwork, some parts of the training contents will no longer be present in the minds of the interviewers.

Second or follow-up training may be provided for various reasons. Interviewers may have missed the original training but are to conduct interviews nonetheless. Or it may transpire during the field period that further interviewers are needed. This second or follow-up training should be as comprehensive as the original training in order to ensure comparability of results. However, practice shows that compromises must sometimes be made and only a short training programme is provided. Especially when school or university students are recruited as interviewers, certification of participation or training certificates can be issued, so that the participants have evidence of their activity.

2.1. What are the contents of the general training?

The aim of the general part of the interview training is to explain the general rules that apply to (standardised) interviews. The following areas should be covered (see Schnell et al., 2011):

1. Contact with respondents; practising making contact; introduction to the documentation of the contact process (contact strategies and convincing people to participate)
2. Rules of behaviour for the interview situation (neutrality, etc.), especially for non-verbal behaviour
3. The handling of the media employed (e.g., entering responses during a CAPI interview)
4. Information about quality control measures, reference to the consequences of attempts to deceive

The basic task, or the aim, that the interviewer should pursue is to achieve maximum willingness to participate and ability to respond on the part of the respondent. This is imparted as follows through basic training with a focus on rules of behaviour (see the guidelines for standardised interviews proposed by Prüfer & Stiegler, 2002):

- Explanation of/information on standardisation or standardised interviews (structure of the interview and the questionnaire, probing, question types, etc.)
- Practical implementation of a standardised interview with rules and tips
- How to handle the questionnaire and the administration program (CAPI/CATI and, e.g., predictive diallers)
- Especially in the case of telephone interviews: voice training or training in the effect of speech and the voice
- How to handle the technical equipment (e.g., headset, laptop)

To this end, the interviewers are given all the necessary documentation – the so-called "tools of the trade" – comprising, for example, general rules of interviewing (rule book), a list of arguments that can be used when making contact with people (list of arguments) and a further list with answers to FAQs. Interviewers should also be given a list of behaviours that may arise in interview situations (e.g., what to do in the case of a temporary failure of the telephone system). These documents, on which the training is based, contain the necessary general instructions and information for all areas of the job.

2.2. Contents of project-specific training

The aim of the project-specific part of the interviewer training is to discuss the planned investigation and particular problems associated with the project. This part of the training should cover the following areas (see Schnell et al., 2011):

- Explanation of the planned investigation (e.g., objectives of the project, the principal, sampling, selection of target persons, use of the data)

- Explanation of the questionnaire (all questions, filter questions used to route respondents through the questionnaire, particularities of individual questions, etc.)
- Explanation of the documentation of the responses
- If applicable, the handling of medical tests or measurements to be conducted in addition to the interview

Especially in the case of very extensive projects, it makes sense to provide the interviewers with this information in written form as well. This can be useful, for example, to enable the interviewers to answer any questions that the respondents may have when they contact them, thereby increasing their willingness to participate. Moreover, all further additional documents, such as the advance letter to which the interviewer refers when he first contacts the respondent, should also be accessible at all times. All the necessary information about the project (e.g., flyers, project website, etc.) and any deviating project-specific special provisions should be conveyed to the interviewers verbally during training and be made available to them in writing if they have not been integrated as information into the programmed questionnaire.

When using interviewers for surveys of specific target groups, for example social elites, they must also be trained in the particularities of these groups. Moreover, in every interviewer training it is advisable to immediately put the imparted theory into practice – in other words, to round the training off with practice on a PC/laptop.

After successfully completing the basic training and the project-specific training, interviewers conduct their first "real" interviews. Ideally, these first interviews should take place under supervision. Here, too, this depends decisively on the survey mode. In the case of telephone surveys, the supervisor can either listen in on the interview or it can be conducted in his presence. In the case of both CATI and CAPI interviews, the complete interview can be recorded, provided that the respondent give his consent.

In the case of face-to-face interviews, either the most realistic mock interviews possible should be conducted (in the laboratory) or a supervisor should sit in on the first real interview.

One way or the other, it is essential that the interview be discussed with the interviewer immediately afterwards. The purpose of this feedback is not only to correct the interviewers' mistakes but also to support and motivate them. So-called twinning with an experienced interviewer complements the ongoing supervision, and the support it provides should not be underestimated.

3. What quality assurance and quality control measures can be implemented?

Despite conscientious recruitment and intensive training, quality assurance and control measures must be implemented. Even in the case of a very experienced and reliable staff of interviewers, unconscious mistakes may be made, which must be detected. Furthermore, one should always bear in mind the financial incentive that may contribute to wilful misconduct. The following questions must therefore be asked:

3.1. When should quality checks be implemented?

Checks (specific routine checks and further interviewer checks) should be conducted during the entire project term. Although the main purpose of these checks is to detect wilful misconduct or attempted fraud, other problems that arise during the interview situation can also be identified. It may be possible to solve these problems by providing retraining or making adjustments to the questionnaire.

3.2. How can quality checks be implemented?

Quality checks can be carried out (a) directly with the respondent, (b) by checking the material from the individual interviews (e.g., by using consistency checks, which are programmable in computer-assisted interviews), (c) on the basis of the aggregated data, or (d) by the supervisor while the interview is being conducted (e.g., by means of observation or, in the case of telephone interviews, by listening in, which is possible at any time). Moreover, the data about each individual interviewer (e.g., about the number and duration of the interviews conducted) and about individual items (in the form of question- and response-time measurement), which are collected with the help of the CATI administration and interview program, are available to the supervisor at all times, so that immediate measures can be taken if anomalies are detected. If respondents agree to the interview being recorded, recordings of complete interviews can be used for the purposes of quality control and as training material. Performance, error, and falsification checks should be carried out continuously during the entire field period.

Fictitious (i.e., incorrect or non-existent) addresses are also used to monitor interviewers. If an interviewer nonetheless claims that a complete interview was conducted at such an address, wilful falsification must be assumed. An additional control procedure in the case of telephone interviews is the use of "pseudo respondents". Generally speaking, interviewers should be informed about these checks during their training, so that this knowledge can contribute to increasing their motivation.

3.3. How can quality assurance take place?

3.3.1. Retraining

Retraining provided to telephone interviewers should, on the one hand, be regarded as feedback about work done. On the other hand, it serves to discuss with the interviewers any errors or weaknesses detected in the course of quality controls and to clarify how the behaviour of the interviewer can be improved and errors avoided. The basis for this retraining is a structural analysis of the CATI system data, which provide an exact picture of the productivity of the individual interviewers. Quality problems detected in face-to-face interviews can also be improved within the framework of retraining. However, as the possibilities for control are difficult to implement in the case of face-to-face interviews, interviewers are frequently excluded from conducting further interviews when such problems occur. And especially when no improvement in the quality of their work is achieved through retraining, termination of the contract of the interviewer in question must be considered.

It is also possible to ring up randomly selected respondents after the interview and to ask them about the interview and the interviewer. At least in the case of CATI interviews, this should not be done straight away because respondents might show a lack of understanding for what they perceive to be a "further interview," and one risks prompting general rejection of participation in telephone surveys. However, by informing respondents at the end of the actual interview that they may receive such a call, irritation on their part can be minimised. The other option is to have a second interviewer ask respondents about the interview and the interviewer immediately after the interview has been conducted.

3.3.2. Debriefing

At the end of each successfully (or unsuccessfully) conducted interview, the interviewers can be individually asked questions about the interview – for example, about their assessment of the difficulties that they and the respondent experienced. Complementary to this, it is definitely to be recommended that a joint debriefing session be held at the end of the field period with all the interviewers who participated in the survey. If a personal debriefing is not possible, each interviewer should at least provide a written personal assessment of his experiences. If the interviewers have not already pointed out to their supervisor general or subjective difficulties or anomalies during the field period that might not be immediately apparent from the data, they can do so during the group debriefing or in their personal report. Moreover, specific incidents or experiences can be shared with the other interviewers, which is conducive to a good atmosphere. And to motivate the interviewers, or to keep them motivated, it is advantageous not only to pay them well and to ensure a good working atmosphere but also to closely involve them in the research or survey project.

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