

Introduction: The Survey Interview

This factsheet will describe the processes involved in the Survey interview. It will focus only on the face to face interview which the majority of UK social surveys, including those represented on the Question Bank, use for their data collection.

Further information about modes of data collection can be found in Question Bank Factsheet 2 'Methods of Data Collection'.

The face to face survey interview involves a specially trained interviewer going to a pre selected address and identifying the resident (s) who live there. Once all of the residents have been named the interviewer randomly selects one resident for interview. If that resident is at home and they agree to participate the interview will take place in the house, otherwise the interviewer may have to call back or make an appointment to go back at a more convenient time.

The interview itself involves the interviewer asking questions displayed on a laptop computer screen and then typing in the answers which are usually pre-coded. For particularly sensitive questions the interviewer may hand the laptop to the respondent who will read the questions and tap in the answers themselves following the on screen instructions. Further details on the type of interviewing called Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing are available on the Qb CAPI factsheet. All of this process is time consuming and needs careful training and skill on the part of the interviewer to gain co-operation from potential respondents.

Interviewers

Professional survey agencies such as the Office for National Statistics and the National Centre for Social Research in the UK have their own trained interviewers who work across a range of surveys. Fowler (2002:118) sees three primary roles that the interviewer must carry out:

1. Locate and enlist selected respondents.
2. Train and motivate respondents to be good respondents.
3. To ask questions, record answers and probe to ensure that question objectives are met.

The work of an interviewer is primarily part time at times which suit the respondents; commonly evenings and weekends when people are more likely to be at home. The mobile nature of the work also means that the interviewer must have a car and be physically fit enough to cover a large area with a heavy laptop bag. The interviewer will need to be able to confidently approach people in their own homes and persuade them to take part in the interview. They will also need to be highly organised.

The actual interview will take a small percentage of the interviewers time, the rest of their task being travelling to the sample area, knocking on doors, writing down what addresses they have called at and what time, revisiting addresses up to five times or more and then all of the administration after the actual interview has been conducted including sending the data via a modem back to the field centre.

Interviewers generally work through out the year in all weathers, all areas and must contend with entry phones, pets and other distractions. When an interviewer feels unsafe in an area they generally ask a colleague or a supervisor to accompany them and always tell someone reliable where they will be working, notifying the local police that they are in the area if necessary. In short – it is not an easy task!

Training and Supervision

All interviewers who work for the Office for National Statistics or the National Centre for Social Research will be trained by the organisation. General training tends to cover broad areas such as interviewing skills, doorstep techniques and use of the laptop computer. Each interviewer must have a series of practice role play interviews and will be accompanied by their area supervisor regularly during their first few months.

As well as this general training, interviewers will attend some 'Briefing Sessions' before they begin work on any new survey. These are specific to the survey in question and will include an introduction to the survey and why it is important, if the survey has run before some results and effects of the previous year's data, introduction to the questionnaire and sampling issues, a run through of the questionnaire on the individual laptop computers and some practice interview sessions.

These briefing sessions take place around the country and are carried out by the research team who have developed the survey. They are a chance for the interviewers to get together with their colleagues and discuss any issues.

The example below is taken from the 2005 Home Office Citizenship Survey User Guide. Almost all of the surveys covered by the Qb will have a similar User Guide detailing the interviewer training / briefing sessions.

4 FIELDWORK

Fieldwork on the survey was carried out by trained interviewers who were members of NatCen's field interviewer panel. Interviews were carried out between 8 March and 30 September 2005.

4.1 Briefings

All interviewers conducting interviews on the study received a full day briefing by NatCen research and field staff and, in most cases, Home Office staff.

Four hundred and eighty-one interviewers received a full briefing for the study. In addition, 17 experienced interviewers who were unable to attend full briefings were briefed at home by senior field staff who had attended previous full briefings.

The briefings covered:

- *The background to the survey:* the objectives of the research, topics covered and use of the data (these sections were presented by a Home Office representative), the sample design and assignment types.
- *Fieldwork procedures:* making contact with households, selection of households and respondents, boost sample screening procedures (including an exercise), identifying and meeting needs for translation.
- *The questionnaire:* practice session using the CAPI program to interview an example respondent (the researcher), including use of the showcards and shuffle pack.

Interviewers were also provided at the briefings with a set of written project instructions which provided detailed information on the procedures to be followed (see Appendix A).

Example 1: Interviewer Briefings. Taken from the 2005 Home Office Citizenship Survey User Guide.

Once the interviewer has been briefed and the fieldwork has begun they will be closely monitored by a local supervisor and their interviews can also be monitored by the research team once data has been downloaded to the fieldwork centre.

The Interview Situation

The data collection phase of a survey using face to face interviews normally consists of the following elements (not necessarily in this order):

1. Questionnaire design finalised
2. Sample drawn (normally using the Postcode Address File for household surveys)
3. Interviewer briefings / training days
4. Interviewers issued with their addresses and all fieldwork documents
5. Advance Letters sent out to all respondents
6. Interviewers begin their field calls
7. Data is transmitted back to the field office
8. Data is checked and any inconsistencies followed up
9. Fieldwork finishes.

Once the advance letter has been sent out the interviewer will begin to call at their sampled addresses. Who they select for interview at that address is strictly random unless the whole household is required for the study. Random selection is done using by asking the person at the door the names of all adults over 16 in the household. This is recorded onto an Address Record Form which each interviewer will have been issued telling them the household addresses to call at. Each household will have been given a unique identifier and the interviewer will follow careful instructions to randomly select one household member.

This example of the type of Address Record Form used is taken from the British Social Attitudes Survey 2005:

C : Establish number of persons aged 18+ at (selected) DU														
C1.	ESTABLISH NUMBER OF ADULTS AGED 18+ IN (SELECTED) DU BY ASKING: Including yourself, how many people aged 18 or over live in this (<i>house/flat/part of the accommodation</i>)? WRITE IN HERE _____ →													
	<table border="0"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> INCLUDE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People who normally live at the address but are away for less than 6 months • People away at work for whom this is the main address • Boarders and lodgers </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> EXCLUDE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People aged 18+ who live elsewhere due to work • Spouses who are separated and no longer resident • People away for 6 months or more </td> </tr> </table>			INCLUDE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People who normally live at the address but are away for less than 6 months • People away at work for whom this is the main address • Boarders and lodgers 	EXCLUDE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People aged 18+ who live elsewhere due to work • Spouses who are separated and no longer resident • People away for 6 months or more 									
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	Note about BSA specific rules on students: Always include if sampled address is either main term-time address or main out-of-term address Always exclude if the sampled address is neither main term-time address nor main out-of-term address													
INTERVIEWER SUMMARY: <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">1 PERSON AGED 18+ ONLY</td> <td style="text-align: center;">A</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Go to D1</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">2+ PERSONS AGED 18+</td> <td style="text-align: center;">B</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Go to C2</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">NO ELIGIBLE RESIDENT (<i>i.e. no one aged 18+</i>)</td> <td style="text-align: center;">770</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Go to F2</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">NUMBER OF PERSONS AGED 18+ NOT ESTABLISHED</td> <td style="text-align: center;">D</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Go to F1</td> </tr> </table>			1 PERSON AGED 18+ ONLY	A	Go to D1	2+ PERSONS AGED 18+	B	Go to C2	NO ELIGIBLE RESIDENT (<i>i.e. no one aged 18+</i>)	770	Go to F2	NUMBER OF PERSONS AGED 18+ NOT ESTABLISHED	D	Go to F1
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NO ELIGIBLE RESIDENT (<i>i.e. no one aged 18+</i>)	770	Go to F2												
NUMBER OF PERSONS AGED 18+ NOT ESTABLISHED	D	Go to F1												
C2.	IF 2+ PERSONS AGED 18+: Ask for name or initials of each person aged 18+. List in alphabetical order in the grid below. Continue on a separate sheet if necessary.													
	Name/Initials	Person Code	Name/Initials											
		01												
		02												
		03												
		04												
		05												
		06												
		07												
		08												
		09												
		10												
		11												
		12												
If 2-12 PERSONS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at the selection label on page 1 of the ARF • In the 'Person/DU' row: find the number corresponding to the total number of persons. • In 'Select' row: number beneath total number of persons is the selected person code. Ring on grid above and write in at C3 below. IF 13+ PERSONS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a selection using the lookup chart in section H. Write in at C3 below. 														
C3.	ENTER CODE NUMBER OF SELECTED PERSON	GO TO D1												

Example 2: Address Record Form. Taken from the British Social Attitudes Survey 2005

If the selected person is available at the time of the interviewers call the interview will take place in the person's home. If they are not available the interviewer will either make an appointment or call back to that address another time. If the selected respondent refuses to take part that address is dropped from the survey.

The initial doorstep interaction with the respondent is critical for the interviewer. They must engage the person and interest them in the survey enough to allow them to give up their time. They must also reassure the potential respondent that their responses will be confidential and not attributed in any way to them and that their views and opinions really are important.

Hox and De Leeuw (2002: 103) note that the following factors can enhance response rates. The interviewer should:

1. Appear trustworthy. They must identify themselves immediately, show their identity badges, mention the survey organisation and reassure respondents that they are not salesmen.
2. Appear friendly. Interviewers have to strike a balance between professionalism and friendliness. If they are in a run down area then wearing a suit for example may make respondents wary. Interviewers should have some knowledge of the area that they are in so that they can adapt their behaviour to reassure potential respondents.
3. Adapt to the situation at the doorstep. If there is an obvious party happening in the house or a screaming child then the interviewer should withdraw and call back at a later time.
4. React to the respondent. The interviewer must listen carefully to the respondent and answer all questions in a reassuring way.

Once the respondent has agreed to the interview the interviewer will enter the house and set up their laptop, preferably in a room where there are no other people. They will explain the survey briefly and tell the respondents what they are expected to do, for example saying something like 'I will ask you a question and then show you a card with a number of answer categories, please tell me the number of the category that best reflects your answer / opinion'.

Should a respondent not answer the question adequately then the interviewer may probe them with words like 'and could you tell me a little more about that?'. Probing instructions are often given to interviewers during the interview, or a line to read out to clarify the question may be given to the interviewer before they ask the respondent.

In CAPI programmes one of the advantages for the interviewer is that help instructions including question explanations are given in a series of help keys that can be accessed during the interview.

Example 3 is a CAPI screenshot which the interviewer would have seen. This is taken from the Survey of Public Attitudes to Quality of Life and the Environment 2001. Interviewer instructions are in capitals.

F_Cntry1	frequency of visits to countryside	
Routing: All		
Notes:		
ASK OR RECORD – SHOWCARD I		
During the last 12 months, how often have you made visits for pleasure to the countryside – except for passing through and proper holidays. (Would it be...)		
INDIVIDUAL PROMPT – SHOWCARD I		
CODE FIRST THAT APPLIES		
1 Most days?		
2 At least once a week (on average)?		
3 At least once a month (on average)?		
4 Occasionally?		
5 or Not at all?		
F_Cntry1	.1.	MostDy

Example 3: CAPI Screenshot. Taken from 2001 Survey of Public Attitudes to Quality of Life and the Environment

At the end of the interview the respondent will be thanked for their time and may also be asked for their permission to be contacted again by the survey agency, either to follow-up the interview to check on the interviewers behaviour or to take part in subsequent rounds of the survey.

Respondents who are in the sample of a longitudinal or panel survey who are interviewed repeatedly over a number of months or years will get regular updates on survey progress from the survey organisation and may get Christmas cards or other incentives to remind them of the importance of their participation and their value to the agency.

Errors and Problems with the Survey Interview

There is much debate in the literature as to the ways in which the interviewers will affect the responses to the survey. The interviewers should ask the questions in the same way with exactly the same wording and emphasis to all respondents. This is why you will sometimes see this type of interview referred to as the standardised survey interview.

There are a number of rules which interviewers should follow to get the most error free data:

- Find the correct address and correctly sample an individual from the address to be a respondent.
- Read the questions exactly as written on the questionnaire.
- Prompt in a non directive way if the respondent struggles to answer.
- Record the response correctly and accurately.
- Maintain a neutral relationship with the respondent whilst gaining their trust and cooperation.

Much has been written about interviewer error and ways it can be reduced, see the further reading section below for more details. Interviewers are clearly well placed to have an effect on the data produced for a survey. They are the frontline of the sampling procedures in the household and they ask the questions that lead to the data mainly in an unsupervised interview situation.

Good training and supervision go some way to addressing interviewer error, however once the survey is in the field the research team is largely dependent on the interviewers to be reliable and follow their rules.

The key sources of error or bias that may be introduced by the interviewer can be summarised as:

1) **Sampling error.**

The interviewer may make mistakes at this stage either by knocking on the wrong door (houses, flats and so on are not always numbered) or by selecting the wrong respondent.

2) **Influencing or leading the respondent.**

Although interviewers are trained not to do this they may re-word the question slightly to help the respondent understand which may influence the response and will mean that each respondent has not been asked exactly the same question. This may also be an issue when interviewers need to probe the respondent for an answer.

3) **Incorrect Reporting.**

The interviewer may misunderstand the response or code it wrongly through the CAPI programme.

4) **Rapport.**

Interviewers may get too friendly with the respondent leading to a situation where they are beginning to lead the interview or expect questions to be answered in a certain way. If the interviewer is too cold and does not build up any rapport however the respondent may be reluctant to spend an hour answering fairly personal questions.

5) **Social Desirability.**

Respondents may feel that the interviewer is from a certain social background and may try to answer in the way that they feel the interviewer would expect them to, or try to please the interviewer by providing what they consider to be the 'right' answer.

Summary

Face to face survey interviewing is the most common method of data collection in large scale social surveys in the UK.

The large survey agencies each have a field force of trained interviewers who work on a number of projects.

The interviewer's role is not easy and involves many skills including administration, organisation and friendly persuasion.

Each survey follows a similar fieldwork pattern and interviewers are specifically briefed on the survey they are working on.

Interviewers can introduce error and bias into survey data, research teams try to counteract this error through good questionnaire design and strict training procedures.

Further Reading

There are many books which discuss survey interviewing, including most major Social Research Methods texts. Below are a few key texts:

Alreck P. and Settle R. (1995) *'The Survey Research Handbook'* Irwin McGraw Hill, Boston

Fowler F. J., Jr and Mangione T.W. (1990) *'Standardized Survey Interviewing: Minimizing Interviewer Related Error'* Sage, London

Groves R. et al (2004) *'Survey Methodology'* Wiley, London, Chapter 9

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