

The interview

Source: Marcus and Ducklin (1998) *Success in Sociology*

This can range from the questionnaire (conducted in person), through open-ended questions to free-flowing discussion either with individuals or with focus groups. The latter can allow a deeper understanding of individual opinions and behaviour to develop, but loses the capacity to engage meaningfully with large numbers of people and makes statistical analysis problematic. The interviewer needs always to be aware of the possibility of interviewer bias.

The use of interviews can offer important insights into patterns of social behaviour. Elizabeth Bott studied changing family patterns on the basis of detailed interviews with only 20 families, and yet her findings on the role of close kinship connections affecting marital relationships have been regularly quoted in textbooks for their insightful understandings. Howard Becker is critical of the interviewers' role, suggesting that the requirement for them to be passive does not represent meaningful social interaction and that the data collected is likely to lack authenticity.

Perhaps the most valuable way to employ detailed interviews is in conjunction with other methods. Young and Willmott, in their study of Bethnal Green, supplemented their questionnaire approach with detailed interviews and long-term observation, whilst Hollowells' study of lorry-drivers used interview and observational techniques.

Many of the answers are in the passage. Some are not! If you have difficulties, then make a note that you should return and revise.

1. What different forms can interviews take?
2. Suggest the advantages of a questionnaire conducted in person over the free-form interview style.
3. What is the main danger of the interview technique in the view of Marcus and Ducklin?
4. How many families did Bott interview in her study of families?
5. What criticism can be made of Bott for her sample size?
6. How does Becker criticise interviewing as a sociological technique?
7. What methodology and perspective is Becker famous for?
8. How can interview results be supplemented to make them more rigorous?
9. In what way can interviews be said to be more reliable than observational techniques?
10. Name two studies which used interviews in conjunction with another method of study.
11. Name three different methods of sampling for a questionnaire.
12. What is a focus group and how does it differ from an interview?
13. Interviewers are generally highly trained for their work. Why is this necessary?
14. Evaluate the usefulness of interviewing as a sociological tool.