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THE GOOD WILL OF IMPORTANT PEOPLE: MORE ON THE JEOPARDY OF THE INTERVIEW

BY LEWIS A. DEXTER

Specialized publics, such as Congressmen, physicians, or community leaders, are frequently subjects of opinion surveys. Their good will may be jeopardized unless steps are taken to maintain their confidence and trust in opinion research, and not to exhaust their time and patience. The author offers various suggestions, based in part on his own research experience, for dealing with the situation.

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AS THE editor of the *Public Opinion Quarterly* pointed out, "The greater part of opinion research rests on kindness and confidence: kindness in the willingness of respondents to give time to the interview . . . , confidence in accepting the implicit or explicit assurance of the interviewer that . . . the survey will in no way harm [the interviewee's] interests."[1] The succeeding three articles in the Spring 1964 *POQ* suggest the jeopardy of the *survey* interview, when kindness is abused or confidence is betrayed.

The probability is, however, that there is a more imminent and serious danger to the public opinion industry and the social science profession in the abuse or potential abuse of interviews with specialized and identifiable respondents, especially elite interviewees. And because elite interviewees can influence legislation and acceptance, abuse of their confidence and kindness may constitute a danger to the survey interview itself. There are two major respects in which the good will of elite interviewees (and, incidentally, of others who are clearly identifiable) is, or is likely to be, strained—first, abuse of time and patience, second, betrayal of confidence and trust.

[1] See *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 28, 1964, p. 118, and the three succeeding articles, especially Rome G. Arnold, "The Interview in Jeopardy: A Problem in Public Relations," pp. 119-123. On the same general topic, see the valuable comment by Eleanor Wolf, "Some Questions about Community Self-surveys," *Human Organization*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1964, pp. 85-89.

TIME AND PATIENCE

On the one hand, certain elite interviewees are far more likely to receive repeated requests for interviews than are choices for survey interviews; on the other hand, most members of professional and political elites are of necessity far more conscious of the value of time than the average person. Unfortunately, the concentration of research effort tends to follow journalistic and academic fashions—for instance, it is highly probable that Washington officials concerned in 1964 with civil rights will receive far more requests for interview time than officials concerned with the management of forest land or the regulation of interstate commerce. And the growth of the (in itself sound) pedagogical emphasis upon direct contact, learning through handling the data, means that inexperienced or ill-prepared students needlessly take up the time of important persons. And, in at least a few areas, the very success and popularity (they are not necessarily the same) of the interview technique are likely to make it more ineffective by destroying the willingness of subjects to be genuinely cooperative.

These points can best be illustrated by discussion of three occupational categories whose members are often asked for interviews:

1. *Congressmen.* When I first conducted interviews with members of Congress in 1953-1954, few of those with whom I talked made any clear distinction between the academic interviewer and the journalistic interviewer seeking background information for a serious piece. By 1959 some Congressmen were complaining about the frequency and the "stupidity" of academic interviews. The reasons for the latter complaint appeared to be two. First, a good many interviewers ask questions of elite interviewees when the latter have no particular feeling of expertise or even opinion about the matter but know, *unlike the average member of the general public,* that documentation is available or have a clear idea who are experts. Second, a good many interviewers carry over from survey to elite interviewing a bothersome insistence upon asking questions explicitly and precisely, whereas most Congressmen and many other elite interviewees prefer to handle an interview as a conversation and expect those who talk with them to be intelligent enough to know when a question has been answered implicitly. (I have not conducted congressional interviews *except with personal acquaintances* since 1959; but in connection with a book on Congress that I am now writing I expect to undertake some in late 1964, and I half-anticipate much greater difficulty in getting cooperation than I experienced in 1953.)

Several partial solutions to the problem of abuse of congressional time and patience may be suggested. With appropriate modifications,

these may also be relevant to the over-interviewing of other elite or specialized respondents.

a. Such leading learned societies as AAPOR, American Political Science Association, and American Sociological Association might set up a clearinghouse for would-be academic interviewers and notify members of Congress that they stand ready to screen such persons. Obviously, many Congressmen, as a matter of good will or to please constituents, would continue to accord time for irritating interviews, but, nevertheless, such a clearinghouse procedure might serve to get openings for serious scholars with Congressmen who would otherwise turn them down. In fact, the next foundation considering a grant to study some aspect of legislative politics might profitably give the money to underwrite such a clearinghouse.

b. Through such a clearinghouse, and also in the planning of any study, more emphasis might be placed on consulting available documentation, whether published or unpublished. Scholars who emphasize the interview as a research technique (myself included) sometimes overlook relevant published material, or fail to explore the possibility of locating relevant unpublished written materials, such as correspondence. Generally speaking, such written material cannot be used *entirely* in place of the interview in political studies, but it can sometimes reduce the amount of interview time needed from a given respondent, make the questions and conversation with him more meaningful and significant to him, or reduce the total number of interviews needed.

c. Such a clearinghouse could also serve to focus professional attention upon the increasingly annoying problem created for some prominent people by the emphasis in college classes on the research interview. A year or so ago, I was talking to an instructor who told me proudly that, although he had not thought too much of the students in a particular class, during spring vacation one of them had managed to get a couple of hours' time from a Federal cabinet officer, another from a leading Senator, etc. So far as I could find out, however, absolutely no contribution to knowledge had resulted from these interviews, and the students could as well have practiced on less preoccupied individuals—with less danger that their practice would deprive serious scholars of opportunities later.

d. This is not to deny the value of student practice, but students should not acquire proficiency at the expense of the busiest targets. Studies of Congressmen undertaken by graduate students, for instance, might often, so far as the substantive problem goes, be revised to focus on state legislators; and, frequently, information solicited from Congressmen could be obtained or verified in part by ex-Congressmen

(who are often pleased to be interviewed and can spare more time, make more correspondence accessible, etc.). And where it is simply a matter of practice in interviewing, the practice is just as great (though the excitement may not be) if a student interviews one of the five commissioners of a state commission instead of a Congressman. (Here, again, some care in selecting the less currently exciting fields is desirable. Probably, at present, members of state commissions against discrimination are often solicited for interviews, whereas it may be that few students of political behavior think of interviewing members of the Appellate Tax Board, a politically very sensitive and interesting agency in some jurisdictions.)

2. *Community officials and leaders in middle-sized communities.* University teachers in political science and sociology often encourage all students in their classes to interview a local official. In large cities, students may be referred to a public relations officer or the like; in small towns, if there is resentment, there will be feedback to the teachers; but in middle-sized cities, perhaps, neither of these things happens. And yet, a number of such interviews will tend to make serious co-operation more difficult if, later on, a really first-rate student or a faculty member wants to undertake a significant study.

3. *Physicians.* It is unlikely that any professional group is as much assaulted by salesmen (detail men) as physicians. Add to this the facts that several advertising agencies finance studies of the effectiveness of their advertisements and of detail men, and that these studies tend to be concentrated in metropolitan areas where competent interviewers are readily available, and it is not hard to see why some physicians are not unduly welcoming to interviewers. In any case, as members of an independent profession, their time is particularly valuable to them.

The solution in this field is not obvious to me—but at least university scholars who are employed as research consultants to pharmaceutical and advertising firms might try to see if alternative ways of answering client needs could be constructed. As I look back at my own brief experience in this field, I cannot see that the interviewing was generally worth the bother, either practically or theoretically; its main function (like that of much interviewing conducted for political campaigns) was to assuage the client's nervousness or to help the advertising agency feel it really had a gimmick. If such nonrational purposes lead to a good deal of interviewing of physicians, social psychologists ought to be able to invent equally lucrative and less bothersome (to physicians) ways of meeting these purposes.

CONFIDENCE AND TRUST

The imposition upon the time and patience of elite interviewees is

a consequence of the publications explosion and the university population explosion. It will lead to growing exasperation but not to a sudden catastrophic reversal of the present acceptance of social science researchers engaged in interviewing.

The situation is more perilous in regard to the abuse of interviewee trust and confidence. Here, there is a danger—a very real and serious danger—that some few dramatic cases might upset a significant number of influential people, in such a way as seriously to hurt the profession and the industry. The considerable furore in Congress about the jury-tapping episode indicates what may happen. Cornell University, through the Springdale study, apparently suffered something of the sort.[2]

On the whole, the academic and public opinion professions have been plain lucky that, so far, there has been no dramatic, damaging abuse of confidence. Yet, in my own observation and experience, I have seen enough instances where academic *organizations* as a whole do not take needed steps to protect their sources, that I have, for myself, made two decisions: (1) I will never assure any interviewee that I can protect his confidence, and, on the contrary, will tell him that I probably cannot do so except when I, personally, keep all the records of interviews, and (2) vice versa—in the role of interviewee, rather than interviewer, I will not tell any interviewer anything I regard as conceivably embarrassing or harmful to anyone I respect or like, or to whom I have an obligation, unless I know that the interviewer himself is personally trustworthy, *and also that he has sole supervision over his reports of his interviews.*

It happens that I am asked to give interviews because I have taken a moderately important part in several political campaigns and in state government, etc. And, precisely because I am familiar with the way in which interviews are handled, I have decided, ordinarily, to refuse requests for help, *no matter how worthy the purpose and attractive the interviewer,* where any possibility of embarrassing abuse of confidence exists!

The emphasis on academic *organization* is central. Where one or two individuals have the only copies of reports of particular interviews, it may be possible to control confidences, and to retain the feeling of obligation to the interviewee. But the more remote the reader or archivist of a report is from the actual interviewee and interview situation, the less feeling of obligation he has to the interviewee, and the more temptation he feels to tell a good story even if that means betraying a confidence.

[2] See, for instance, the editorial on that study in *Human Organization,* Vol. 17, No. 2, 1958, pp. 1-2.

The following events, which I have seen (somewhat disguised so as to avoid embarrassment but retaining the basic issue), have involved the risk of betraying trust in regard to identifiable interviewees:

1. A study was undertaken in which a good deal of information was incidentally obtained about businessmen who were violating certain tax codes. During the months immediately following the writing up of the interviews several of these men were indicted. It happened that one of the research analysts, for good reason, had frequent conferences with the tax authorities in question, and the interviewers felt that he had passed on the information. But, in fact, at one time or another several other research officers of the organization, totally unfamiliar with interviewing ethics, a number of clerk typists, and a couple of editors had access to the interviews and could have gossiped.

2. In another study, state political figures were persuaded to give very freely opinions it would have embarrassed them to have known. (Also, in some instances, they reported events that might have made them liable to legal action.) At the headquarters of the project, some distance away, scholars taught courses in which they *required* their students to read a number of these interviews, even though the interviewers repeatedly emphasized that interviewees wanted the interviews to be confidential. The interviewers did not learn of these courses until after the field work was completed, but were not much reassured when they were told that a questionnaire had shown that none of the students had any family connection with the state in question! Who could tell, for instance, when a student might spend a weekend with somebody interested in what they knew?

3. A graduate student who had received information of considerable confidentiality on political matters was subjected to some harassment in his doctor's oral by outside, nondepartmental members of his examining committee because of his failure to name informants in his thesis. It was at least possible that these examiners were more interested in getting "inside dope" than in verifying the accuracy of the thesis.

4. A university researcher's assistant was told, apparently in confidence, in the course of an interview of the exceptionally low opinion the distinguished interviewee held of the late President Kennedy. Either to make a good story or possibly to influence my own political actions, the researcher has several times told me in detail what was said. I suspect that, if he had had the initial contact himself, he would have felt more obligation to respect a confidence whose violation could have greatly hurt the interviewee.

5. On half a dozen occasions, at least, I have seen sets of highly confidential political interviews in unlocked file cabinets, where secre-

taries who had no "need to know" could easily read them, and where any passerby could pick them up, with relatively little risk, if he chose his time appropriately. One study, on which I, myself, did the interviewing of certain aspects of city licensing procedures, involved specific complaints by businessmen and attorneys about the mayor and commissioners, usually given to me with adjurations never to let the authorities know what they had said. I had to write the report, therefore, without submitting the interviews or naming informants. When the sponsoring organization asked for copies of the interviews, I asked them where they would keep them. "Oh, in our offices," they replied. I pointed out that their file cabinets were old and unlocked, and that frequently the room in which the file cabinets were kept was left unguarded. "Oh," said they, "we trust people!"[3]

Frequently, in fact, trusting people is one of the dangers in the academic handling and recording of elite interviews. Interviews should be guarded, so far as reasonably possible, in the spirit in which CIA materials are presumably watched, not because, ordinarily, anybody will betray the trust, but because an occasional failure to keep trust may have extraordinarily serious consequences. (One simple way of making confidence easier to keep: interviewers often dictate interviews, when they could about as well type them up themselves.)

The other difficulty is, of course, that academic people do not always realize what might be embarrassing to people active in politics and the professions, who, in turn, are accustomed to journalists and colleagues who know when breaking a confidence would be dangerous. Frequently, one has to understand a good deal about a specific situation or occupation to see what would be embarrassing to the interviewee, whereas the academician's interest may be quite restricted. (For example, academics may interview a member of the House Judiciary committee about civil rights, knowing nothing of the factional fights in the Congressman's home district, and something he "lets out" could hurt the Congressman in such fights.)

In writing up reports, there is one other respect in which scholars probably could be more cautious than some of them are. I suppose that a dozen times at least I have been fairly certain which Congressman or what state official said something cited in a research study, either because he was the only one in the situation (say on the given committee) who could possibly have made the remark quoted, or because a particular turn of speech is quoted verbatim, which serves to identify quite as well as the name. There is no reason why phrasing cannot be

[3] Although this example is not strictly in the elite field, by happenstance I have heard of "interesting" remarks made by a prominent married couple who had cooperated in a family study, even though I tried to shut the interviewer-raconteur up.

changed in most political studies, and considerably more effort than is usual could be made to disguise a particular informant's position. In *American Business and Public Policy,* I deliberately attributed to Senators or senatorial assistants remarks made by House members where it made no difference or, in a few cases, attributed to a male, rural Representative something said by an urban female, or quoted a remark made by an ex-Congressman in 1953-1955 as though it had been made by an incumbent—again where such switching made no difference to the point and helped disguise the source. In the same book, I have taken similar pains to disguise businessmen in Appalachian City and the Fifty-third Openvirmarky; and, as I recollect, we similarly made a few switches among lobbyists.[4]

[4] R. Bauer, I. Pool, and L. A. Dexter, *American Business and Public Policy,* New York, Atherton, 1963, Part V on Congress, and IV on Pressure Groups, and Chap. 19 on Appalachian City and the 53rd Openvirmarky. I have no reason, incidentally, to think that anybody in Appalachian City was embarrassed by anything attributed to him; but, on the other hand, I could not disguise Delaware (Chap. 16) and at least two (and possibly more) remarks quoted in that chapter were apparently embarrassing to subjects.