"How Do You Know If the Informant is Telling the Truth?"

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Research workers who deal with interview data frequently are asked the question: "How do you know if the informant is telling the truth?" If they are experienced research workers, they frequently push aside the question as one asked only by those unsophisticated in the ways of research. But the persistence with which it comes up suggests that we take it seriously and try to formulate it in respectable terms.

Those who ask the question seem bothered by the insight that people sometimes say things for public consumption that they would not say in private. And sometimes they behave in ways that seem to contradict or cast serious doubt on what they profess in open conversation. So the problem arises: Can you tell what a person *really* believes on the basis of a few questions put to him in an interview? Is this not a legitimate question?

The answer is, "No"—not as stated. It assumes that there is invariably some basic underlying attitude or opinion that a person is firmly committed to, i.e., his *real* belief. And it implies that if we can just develop shrewd enough interviewing techniques, we can make him "spill the beans" and reveal what this basic attitude really is.

To begin with, we must constantly bear in mind that the statements an informant makes to an interviewer can vary from purely *subjective* statements ("I feel terribly depressed after the accident") to almost completely *objective* statements ("The Buick swerved across the road into the other lane and hit the Ford head on"). Many statements, of course, fall somewhere in between: "The driver of the Ford was driving badly because he had been drinking"; or "It was the Ford driver's fault because he was drunk."

In evaluating informants' statements we do try to distinguish the subjective and objective components. But no matter how objective an informant seems to be, the research point of view is: *The informant's statement represents merely the perception of the informant, filtered and modified by his cognitive and emotional reactions and reported through his personal verbal usages.* Thus we acknowledge initially that we are getting merely the informant's picture of the world as he sees it. And we are getting it only as he is willing to pass it on to us in *this particular interview situation.* Under other circumstances the moves he reveals to us may be much different.

Granted this, there are two questions that the research worker wants answered: A) What light does the statement throw on the subjective sentiments of the informant? and B) How much does the informant's report correspond in fact to "objective reality?"

I

A. *The Informant's Report of "Subjective Data"*

The problem here is how to evaluate the informant's subjective report of what he feels or thinks about some subject under investigation. At the outset we must recognize that there are different kinds of subjective data that we may want the informant to report: a) A *current emotional state* of the informant, such as anger, fear, anxiety or depression. Many informants have great difficulty in putting feelings of this sort into words. Even for the most articulate, the verbal expression of complex emotional states is a difficult thing; b) *The informant's opinions,* that is, the cognitive formulation of his ideas on a subject; c) *The informant's attitudes,* that is, his emotional reactions to the subjects under discussion; d) *The informant's values,* that is, the organizing principles that underlie his opinions, attitudes, and behavior; e) *The informant's hypothetical reactions,* that is, his projection of what he would do, think or feel *if* certain circumstances prevailed; and f) *The actual tendencies of the informant to behave or feel* when confronted with certain stimulus situations. Generally, of course, verbal reports are only part of the data on

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the basis of which we infer persons' tendencies to act. Equally important in making these inferences are past behavior and a variety of non-verbal cues that we may detect.

Each of these various kinds of subjective data are elicited by different kinds of questions put in different ways to the informant. The assumption that any one of these represents his "real" feelings in the matter is, of course, unwarranted. For one thing, the informant may have conflicting opinions, values, attitudes or tendencies to act. In fact, the conflict among these various subjective data may be the most important subjective information we obtain. This approach puts in quite a different light the problem of using behavior as a way of validating attitudes. Take, for example, a young housewife who in an interview expresses herself as much in favor of careful budgeting of household finances. She indicates that she and her husband have carefully worked out how much they feel they can afford to spend on various categories and have even gone so far as to make out envelopes in which they put the money allocated to these various purposes. Subsequent to the interview, however, she goes shopping with one of her close friends with whom she feels a good deal of social competition. Under the pressures of this situation she buys a dress which is out of line with her financial plan. It is not very meaningful to say that her behavior in buying the dress "invalidates" her opinions in favor of budgeting. Nor does it make sense to ask what her "real" attitudes toward budgeting are. But because we often expect reasonable behavior in the management of personal affairs and daily activities, we frequently try to get informants to give a rational and consistent picture of their sentiments and behavior when confronted with them in an interview situation. If this young housewife had been asked by the interviewer what she would do if she ran across an unusually attractive dress which was not within her budgetary planning, she might have said that she would refuse to buy it and would incorporate some budgeting plan for the future by which she might be able to purchase such a dress. But the sophisticated researcher does not expect informants to have consistent well-thought-out-attitudes and values on the subjects he is inquiring about.

The difficulties in interpreting informants' reports of subjective data are seriously increased when the informant is reporting not his present feelings or attitudes but those he recollects from the past. This is because of the widespread tendency we all have to modify a recollection of past feelings in a selective way that fits them more comfortably into our current point of view.

But perhaps the major consideration that makes the evaluation of reports of subjective data difficult is the fact that they are so *highly situational.* If, for example, a Democrat is among some Republican friends whose opinions he values highly, he will hesitate to express sentiments that might antagonize or disconcert these friends. If, however, he is among his own intimate friends who think pretty much as he does, he will not hesitate to express a Democratic point of view and, if he is at a Democratic party meeting where there is considerable enthusiasm in support of party causes and he is swept up in this enthusiasm, he may express Democratic sentiments even more strongly than among his own friends. *The interview situation must be seen as just ONE of many situations in which an informant may reveal subjective data in different ways.*

The key question is this: *What factors can we expect to influence this informant's reporting of this situation under these interview circumstances?* The following factors are likely to be important:

1) Are there any ulterior *motives* which the informant has that might modify his reporting of the situation? While making a study among the foremen of a South American company, the researcher was approached one day by a foreman who expressed great interest in being interviewed. In the conversation which followed, he expressed himself with enthusiasm about every aspect of the company under discussion. When the interview closed, he said, "I hope you will give me a good recommendation to the management." His ulterior motives undoubtedly influenced his reporting.

2) Are there any *bars to spontaneity* which might inhibit free expression by the informant? For example, where an informant feels that the affairs of his organization or his own personal life should be put forward in a good light for public consumption, he will hesitate to bring up spontaneously the more negative aspects of the situation.

3) Does the informant have *desires to please* the interviewer so that his opinions will be well thought of? An interviewer known to be identified with better race relations might well find informants expressing opinions more favorable to minority groups than they would express among their own friends.

4) Are there any *idiosyncratic factors* that may cause the informant to express only one facet of his reactions to a subject. For example, in a follow-up interview, an informant was told that she had changed her attitude toward Jews. She then recalled that just before the initial interview a dealer had sent her a wrong couch and she implied that he had tried to cheat her. She recalled that he was Jewish and that she was still mad about this incident and reacted in terms of it to the questions about Jews in the interview. A few days earlier or a few days later she would probably have expressed herself quite differently. Idiosyncratic factors such as mood, wording of the question, individual peculiarities in the connotations of specific words, and extraneous factors such as the baby crying, the telephone ringing, etc., all may influence the way an informant articulates his reactions.

Unless they are taken into account, these various factors that influence the interview situation may cause serious problems and misinterpretation of the informant's statements. To minimize the problems of interpretation, the interview situation should be carefully structured and the interview itself should be carefully handled in the light of these influences. Outside influences should be avoided by arranging an appropriate time and place for interviewing that will eliminate them as much as possible.

The influence of ulterior motives can sometimes be quashed by pointing out that the researcher is in no position to influence the situation in any way. Bars to spontaneity can usually be reduced by assurances to the informant that his remarks are confidential and will be reported to no one else. The confidence that develops in a relationship over a period of time is perhaps the best guarantee of spontaneity, and informants who are important should be developed *over time* with care and understanding. Naturally the interviewer should not

express or, indicate in any way, his disapproval of statements made by the informant or indicate any of his own values that might intrude in the situation. Idiosyncratic factors of connotation and meaning are difficult to account for, but it is certainly a good precaution to ask questions in many different ways so that the complex configuration that a person's sentiments represents can be more accurately understood.

While we never assume a one-to-one relationship between sentiments and overt behavior, the researcher is constantly relating the sentiments expressed to the behavior he observes—or would expect to observe—in the situation under discussion.

In one field situation, the informant was a restaurant supervisor. It was already known that the restaurant owner was a graduate dietician who placed a great deal of stress upon maintaining high professional standards. Midway in the course of the interview, the supervisor remarked in a casual manner—perhaps too casual—that she herself was the only supervisor in the restaurant who was not a college graduate. The supervisor did not elaborate on the point, nor did the interviewer probe at this time. In a lull in the conversation a few minutes later, the interviewer, using the opportunity to return to a topic previously mentioned, said: "I was interested in something you said earlier: that you are the only supervisor here who is not a college graduate—" Before another word was uttered, the supervisor burst into tears. Clearly, the effect attached to the statement made earlier was repressed or concealed and became evident only as revealed in subsequent behavior when she cried.

In some cases the informant may be trying to tell himself—as well as the interviewer—that he does not have a certain sentiment, and may even have convinced himself. In the case of Joe Sloan, a gasoline plant operator, (see the article on "Engineers and Workers," *Human Organization,* Volume 14, No. 4, Winter, 1956) the interview took place shortly after Sloan, a highly ambitious worker, had been demoted to a lower classification. He followed up this rebuff by talking with the plant manager and personnel manager, and he reported calmly that they had not been able to give him any encouragement about his future with the company. Since, even before this setback, Sloan had expressed strong negative sentiments toward management—with apparent relish—one might have expected him to be even more explosive, now that he had this new provocation. The researcher was surprised and puzzled when he said, "I'm nonchalant now. Those things don't bother me anymore." Neither his gestures nor facial expression revealed any emotion.

A week later, Sloan suddenly walked off the job in response to a condition that had recurred often in the past, with only mild expressions of dissatisfaction from Sloan and the other workers. Reflecting on the incident later, we can see that we should have recognized Sloan's "nonchalant" statement as a danger signal. In the light of the recent events that must have intensified his negative sentiments toward management, he must have been making an effort to repress these sentiments. Probably, being unable or unwilling to "blow his top" as before, he no longer had a safety valve and might have been expected to take some rash and erratic action.

These cases suggest the importance of regarding any marked discrepancies between expressed sentiments and observed (or expected) behavior as an open invitation to the researcher to focus his interviewing *and* observation in this problem area.

II

B. *The Informant's Reporting of "Objective" Data*

Frequently the research worker wants to determine from an interview what actually happened on some occasion pertinent to the research. Can we take what the informant reports at face value? In many instances the answer, of course, is "No."

Suppose an informant reports that a number of people are plotting against him. He may be revealing merely his own paranoid tendencies, in which case his statement must be seen as casting light primarily on his distorted perception of the world. But even though plots of this kind are rare in the world, it may just happen that, in this instance, people actually *are* trying to undermine the informant. It is therefore important for the researcher to know in what respects an informant's statement must be taken as a reflection of his own personality and perception and in which respects as a reasonably accurate record of actual events.

How much help any given report of an informant will be in reconstructive "object reality" depends on how much distortion has been introduced into the report and how much we can correct for this distortion. The major sources of distortion in firsthand reports of informants are these:

1. The respondent just did not observe the details of what happened or cannot recollect what he *did* observe, and reports instead what he supposed happened. Data below the informant's observation or memory threshold cannot of course be reported.

2. The respondent reports as accurately as he can, but because his mental set has selectively perceived the situation, the data reported give a distorted impression of what occurred.

3. The informant unconsciously modifies his report of a situation because of his emotional needs to shape the situation to fit his own perspective. Awareness of the "true" facts might be so uncomfortable that the informant wants to protect himself against this awareness.

4. The informant quite consciously modifies the facts as he perceives them in order to convey a distorted impression of what occurred.

Naturally, trained research workers are alert to detect distortion wherever it occurs. How can they do this? First of all, there is an important negative check: *implausibility.* If an account strongly strains our credulity and just does not seem at all plausible, then we are justified in suspecting distortion. For example, an informant, who lived a few miles away from the campus of a coeducational college, reported that one of the college girls had been raped in a classroom during hours of instruction by some of the men college students. She was quite vague as to the precise circumstances—for example, as to what the professor was doing at the time. (Did he, perhaps, rap the blackboard and say, "May I have your attention, please?") This account was obviously lacking in plausibility. Things just do not happen that way. The account may, however, throw light on the informant's personal world. Through other reports we learned that a college girl had indeed been

raped, but the offense had taken place at night, the girl was not on the college campus, and the men were not college students. The woman who told this story was a devout member of a fundamentalist sect that was highly suspicious of the "Godless university." In this context, the story makes sense as a distortion the informant might unconsciously introduce in order to make the story conform to her perception of the university. The test of implausibility must be used with caution, of course, because sometimes the implausible *does* happen.

A second aid in detecting distortion is any knowledge we have of the *unreliability of the informant as* an accurate reporter. In the courtroom, the story of a witness is seriously undermined by any evidence that he has been inaccurate in reporting some important point. In first interviews we will generally have little evidence for judging an informant's reliability unless he happens to be reporting on some situation about which we have prior knowledge. But in repeated interviews, after what the informant has told us has been checked or corroborated by other reports, we can form some idea of how much we can rely on his account. Thus we learn to distinguish reliable from unreliable informants, although we must always be careful not to assume that, just because an informant has proven reliable in the past, we can continue to believe his accounts without further checking.

A third aid in detecting distortion is our *knowledge of an informant's mental set* and an understanding of how it might influence his perception and interpretation of events. Thus we would be on guard for distortion in a labor union leader's report of how management welched upon a promise it made in a closed meeting.

But the major way in which we detect distortion, and correct for it, is by *comparing an informant's account with the accounts given by other informants.* And here the situation resembles the courtroom setting, since we must weigh and balance the testimony of different witnesses, evaluate the validity of eyewitness data, compare the reliability of witnesses, take circumstantial evidence into account, appraise the motives of key persons, and consider the admissability of hearsay information. We may have little opportunity in field research for anything that resembles direct cross-examination, but we can certainly *cross-check* the accounts given us by different informants for discrepancies and try to clear these up by asking for further clarification.

Since we generally assure informants that what they say is confidential, we are not free to tell one informant what the other has told us. Even if the informant says, "I don't care who knows it; tell anybody you want to," we find it wise to treat the interview as confidential. A researcher who goes around telling some informants what other informants have told him is likely to stir up anxiety and suspicion. Of course the researcher may be able to tell an informant what he has heard without revealing the source of his information. This may be perfectly appropriate where a story has wide currency so that an informant cannot infer the source of the information. But if an event is not widely known, the mere mention of it may reveal to one informant what another informant has said about the situation. How can the data be cross-checked in these circumstances?

III

An example from a field study of work teams at the Corning Glass Works illustrates this problem. Jack Carter, a gaffer (top man of the glass making team), described a serious argument that had arisen between Al Lucido, the gaffer and his servitor (his #2 man) on another work team. Lucido and his servitor had been known as close friends. Since the relationship of the interpersonal relations on the team to morale and productivity were central to the study, it was important 1) to check this situation for distortion and 2) to develop the details.

First, the account Carter gave of the situation did not in any way seem implausible. Second, on the credibility of the witness, our experience indicated that Jack Carter was a reliable informant. Third, we had no reason to believe that Carter's mental set toward this other work team was so emotionally involved or biased as to give him an especially jaundiced view of the situation. Furthermore, some of the events he described he had actually witnessed and others he had heard about directly from men on the particular work team. Nevertheless, to check the story and to fill in the details regarding the development of the conflict, we wished to get an account from one of the men directly involved. So an appointment was scheduled with Lucido one day after work. Because it might be disturbing to Lucido and to the others if the research worker came right out and said, "I hear you recently had an argument with Sammy, would you tell me about it?" the researcher sought to reach this point in the interview without revealing this purpose. Lucido was encouraged to talk about the nature of his work and about the problems that arose on his job, with the focus gradually moving toward problems of cooperation within the work team. After Lucido had discussed at length the importance of maintaining harmonious relationships within the work team, the research worker said, "Yes, that certainly is important. You know I've been impressed with the harmonious relationships you have on your team. Since you and the servitor have to work closely together, I guess it's important that you and Sammy are such close friends. Still, I suppose that even the closest of friends can have disagreements. Has there ever been a time when there was any friction between you and Sammy?" Lucido remarked that indeed this had happened just recently. When the researcher expressed interest, he went on to give a detailed account of how the friction arose and how the problem between the two men had finally worked out. It was then possible to compare Lucido's account with that of Carter and to amplify the data on a number of points that Carter had not covered. The informant in this case probably never realized that the research worker had any prior knowledge of the argument he had with his servitor or that this matter was of any greater interest to the researcher than other things discussed in the interview. The main point is this: by the thoughtful use of the information revealed in the account of one informant, the researcher can guide other interviews toward data which will reveal any distortions incorporated in the initial account and usually will provide details which give a more complete understanding of what actually happened.

The problems of distortion are heavily compounded if the researcher is dealing with informants who are giving him secondhand reports. Here, the researcher has to deal, not only with the original distortion that the witness incorporated in the story he told to the informant, but also with any subsequent distortions that the informant introduced in passing it along to the researcher. Of course, an informant who has a shrewd understanding of the situations about which he is reporting secondhand may be able to take into account any distortions or bias in the reports he receives from those who talked to him. It *may* even be that the informant's lines of communication are more direct and intimate than the research worker can establish. In this case, the picture the informant gives may have validity beyond the picture the researcher might get directly from the eyewitnesses themselves.

This kind of situation is illustrated by the case of Doc, a street corner gang leader discussed in *Street Corner Society*. Doc was an extraordinarily valuable informant. Whenever the information he gave could be checked, his account seemed highly reliable. But he had an additional strength: he was also well-informed regarding what was happening in his own group and in other groups and organizations in his district. This was due to the position he occupied in the social structure of the community. Since he was the leader of his own group, the leaders of other groups naturally came to him first to tell him what they were doing and to consult him as to what they should do. His informal leadership position within his own group made him a connecting link between that group and other groups and organizations. Hence developments in the "foreign relations" of the group were known by him before they reached the followers, and usually in more direct and accurate form.

Because of the wide variation in quality of informants, the researcher is always on the lookout for informants such as Doc who can give a reasonably accurate and perceptive account of events the research is interested in. These special informants are frequently found at key positions in the communication structure, often as formal or informal leaders in the organization. They have ability to weigh and balance the evidence themselves and correct for the distortions that may be incorporated from their sources of information. But it is important that they have no needs to withhold or distort the information they report to the researcher. Even so, wherever the researcher has to rest on secondhand reports he must be particularly cautious in his interpretation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we should emphasize that the interviewer is not looking for *the true attitude or sentiment*. He should recognize that informants can and do hold conflicting sentiments at one time and they hold varying sentiments according to the situations in which they find themselves. As Roethlisberger and Dickson *(Management and the Worker)* long ago pointed out, the interview itself is a social situation, so the researcher must also consider how this situation may influence the expression of sentiments and the reporting of events.

With such considerations in mind, the researcher will not ask himself, "How do I know if the informant is telling the truth?" Instead, the researcher will ask, "What do the informant's statements reveal about his feelings and perceptions and what inferences can be made from them about the actual environment or events he has experienced?"