Methodology for Field Work: Interactive Interviews

The principal method that we propose for collecting data during the field work stage of the IAI project can be called an “Interactive Interview” approach. Variants of this method have been used in sociology, anthropology, and in farming systems research. We have drawn ideas from these various traditions, and have adapted them to the specific objectives of this study. 1

One way to describe the essence of the Interactive Interview method is to contrast it to the more well-know social survey approach. By comparing the two approaches, it will become clear that the Interactive approach is based on very different assumptions about sample selection, data collection, and interpretation of findings.

A. The Typical Social Survey

In the social survey approach the researcher is primarily interested applying a pre-established questionnaire to a random sample of respondents. The data are generally applied by a large number of interviewers who follow a rigid set of rules. For example, the interviewers are instructed to read each question exactly as it is written; to follow the precise order that is dictated by the questionnaire; and to remain as removed and objective as possible. No judgements or reactions by the interviewer are allowed. Similarly, no questions are to be asked that lie beyond those in the questionnaire instrument. The research design attempts to apply as many questionnaires as possible. Once the data are transformed into numerical codes, the quantitative variables are analyzed statistically.

A. Merits of Social Surveys

Surveys are the most widely used method in the social sciences, and for good reasons: The data that are produced can be used to describe the sampled population in terms of an array of quantifiable indicators (e.g., average age of the head of household; length of residence; family size). Similarly, the data can be used to quantify the frequency of observed events (e.g., the number of cattle purchased; the number of hectares in pasture). They can also be used to establish the strength of the association between variables (e.g., the correlation between size of herd and hectares in pastures is +.80). If the sample is “representative,” then the results obtained can be generalized to the population from which the sample was taken.

1 The method proposed for the IAI study is derived from two main sources. One source of inspiration comes from qualitative research tradition in sociology and anthropology, as discussed in Holstein and Gubrium (1995), Bernard 19xx, and Glaser and Strauss (1967). Another source of insight comes from the methods associated with the Rapid Rural Appraisal approach, as discussed in Chambers (1987, 1994), Grandstaff, Grandstaff and Lovelace (1987), Grandstaff and Grandstaff (1987), and Beebe (1987).
The popularity of the survey approach can be attributed in part to the merits of the technique that are noted above. But there is another reason as well, and that is associated with the fact that what is often understood as ‘acceptable science’ is based on assumptions that place a premium on quantified indicators and sophisticated statistical manipulations of empirical indicators. Because analyses of survey data conform to these assumptions, they are often treated as more “scientifically valid” than findings that are based on more qualitative methods.

B. Limitations of the Social Surveys

Despite the advantages summarized above, disillusionment with the survey approach has been increasingly voiced by researchers in a number of disciplines. In sociology, for example, there is a sharp division between the majority of individuals who carry out quantitative research (based on surveys), and a minority who carry out qualitative research (like the one we propose here). In anthropology, the division also exists, although in the anthropological tradition it is the quantitative analysts who are in the minority and the qualitative analysts who are in the majority.

For the purposes of the IAI project, the more relevant example of disillusionment with survey methods comes from the field of farm-based research. Starting about two or three decades ago, researchers increasingly found that social surveys were expensive and were generally unable to provide meaningful results, at least in relation to the amount of money and time that was expended. Chambers (1994: 956), who is one of the leading researching in the field of rural development, provides a good summary of the difficulties faced by projects based on survey techniques:

“Again and again, over many years and in many places, the experience had been that large-scale surveys with long questionnaires tended to be drawn-out, tedious, a headache to administer, a nightmare to process and write up, inaccurate and unreliable in data obtained, boring, misleading, difficult to use, and anyway ignored.”

The limitations of the survey method are many, including: the high cost, in terms of financial expense and time invested; the tendency to give priority to the quantity of interviews rather than the quality of information; the tendency to produce superficial data rather than in-depth understanding; the inability to capture the decision process that leads to the outcomes observed; and the inability to generate an understanding of complex relationships that characterize the lives of rural people.

The survey approach also limits the production of information to the items that are included in the questionnaire. There is little room for the respondent to provide additional insights that are not explicitly asked for in the questionnaire. Similarly, there is little room for the respondent to educate the interviewer when the form of the questionnaire itself is based on incorrect assumptions, or when the questionnaire focuses on a less relevant phenomenon, overlooking a more important one. The respondent is therefore treated as a passive element of the interview process. His action is restricted to
responding to particular questions, but he is not permitted the opportunity to participate in the production of information.

Survey data permit one to make statements like: “The average size of the cattle herd in this population is 15.” “Herd size increases by 2.3 head for every additional year of residence in the settlement.” “Increases in the size of pasture are associated with an increase in deforestation.” “Landholders with higher levels of education are more likely to cultivate perennials.” And so on.

Such statements make important contributions to knowledge, of that there is no doubt. Moreover, such statements can be backed up by numbers and tables that conform to the expectations of ‘scientific research.’ But it is also evident that the conclusions tell us little about the decision processes that landholders make as they go through their daily lives. They also fail to provide an in-depth understanding of the incentives and disincentives that enter into the decisions that people make. Indeed, when researchers are faced with these limitations, what they often do is make reference to, say, a correlation coefficient that shows a high association between two variables, and then speculate as to the possible reasons for such an observation. Faced with these dilemmas, we conclude that it is more productive to invest in an alternative approach, based on what we have called the “Interactive Interview.”

B. The Interactive Interview

A. Selecting Respondents

Unlike the social survey, where a large number of respondents are selected on the basis of a random sampling of individuals within a universe, this method selects a small number of “key informants” for in-depth interviews. Key informants are individuals who are strategically placed within the structure of production and marketing that have knowledge relevant to the objectives of the study.

In the case of survey analysis, the most important criterion is that individuals interviewed be selected on a random basis. The selection is independent of whether an individual is competent to answer the questions. With respect to the selection of key informants, the most important criterion is the knowledge that a person possesses, as well as his “narrative competence.” The task of consciously selecting individuals who are both knowledgeable and who are capable of engaging in a “directed conversation” is an critical step in the research process.

In the case of survey analysis, the objective is to apply a questionnaire to a pre-determined number of respondents. With respect to the selection of key informants, there is no *a priori* target number. This flexibility raises the obvious questions, “How do we know when we have a sufficient number of cases?”

The answer to this question is based on the concept of “redundancy.” Once an interactive interview is completed with one individual, or group of individuals, the
process is repeated with additional key informants who occupy the same structural position in the system of production and marketing. The additional information obtained will confirm much of what was already learned; will add new information to the picture; and is likely to produce information that conflicts with that already received. Hence, the process is repeated again with a new respondent, or set of respondents, until the researcher reaches the point where it is evident that information becomes redundant. That is, redundancy is reached when the inclusion of an additional interview does not significantly add to the knowledge that has been gained. The number of interviews that are carried out is therefore contingent on the interview process itself (and is not based on reaching a pre-established number of interviews, as in the case of surveys).

B. The Form of the Interactive Interview

Unlike the application of the survey questionnaire, the interactive interview is more like a “directed conversation.” The researcher uses a roster of questions and scenarios as an interview guide, but the interviewer is not constrained to a predetermined agenda. This approach is sometimes called a “semi-structured” interview, based on a list of question or topics that the interviewer needs to cover during the session.

The interviewer plays an active role in the process, but allows the informant plenty of room to respond. The idea is to converse with informants in such a way that alternate considerations are brought into play. The interviewer may suggest orientations to and linkages between diverse aspects of the informants experience. Questions, prompts, comments and clarifications point informants to particular topics, inviting the informant to share the knowledge that he has derived from his own lived experience.

The application of the interview guide may vary from one interview to the next. The guide can be considered more of a “conversational agenda” than a procedural directive. The use of the guide may vary from one interview from the next. It may be the principal element of the interview conversation on one occasion and virtually abandoned on another as the informant (in interaction with the interviewer) develops his responses. The main rule for using the interview guide is to let the informant’s responses determine whether particular questions are necessary or appropriate. This strategy gives an improvisational, yet focused, quality to the interview.

If the survey researcher is instructed to maintain a thoroughly neutral and impersonal position before the informant, the Interactive Interviewer intentionally activates narrative production. The Interactive Interviewer provokes responses by asking questions, but also by suggesting different scenarios that direct the informant to address issues of interest to the research project. The interviewer sets the general parameters for responses, constraining as well as provoking answers. The interviewer does not tell respondents what to say, but offers them pertinent ways of conceptualizing issues and making connections in a way that provides information that is relevant to the research task at hand.
The objective is not to dictate interpretation but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that address relevant issues. It is assumed that the informant has a stock of knowledge, expressed in its own terms, that is potentially relevant to the research questions. When the Interactive Interview is properly performed, the informant becomes a kind of researcher in his own right, who consults repertoires of knowledge and experience, who links fragments into patterns, and who offers “theoretically” coherent descriptions, accounts and explanations. The conversation allows the informant to go in directions, and to address topics that were not necessarily anticipated by the interviewer, thereby allowing for the possibility of surprises and novel insights. Hence, the respondent is actively involved in the production of information that the interviewer records and analyses.

In order to carry out an effective Interactive Interview, the interviewer needs to know a great deal about the local setting, and about the world that the respondent lives in. The IAI project is privileged to have a large number of very knowledgeable interviewers to carry out the field work. The challenge is to employ that background knowledge in a way that enables the informants to efficiently provide relevant information drawn from their own lived experiences. Expert knowledge can be drawn upon in order to instill confidence in the respondent that the interviewer is generally aware of the issues at hand, and also to make the interview process more efficient by dispensing with many questions that a less knowledgeable interviewer might have to make.

But having very knowledgeable interviewers on the team can also be a danger. The danger is to intimidate respondents, and therefore allow the expert knowledge of the interviewers to dictate the answers provided by the informants. Similarly, expert knowledge may make it very difficult to hear what the informant is saying. It may tempt the interviewer to interpret informant responses in a way that conforms to the interviewer’s own understanding of the situation, and failing to hear what the respondent is actually saying.

For the interviewer, these observations underscore the critical importance of: keeping an open mind; setting aside one’s own conclusions and assumptions; learning to listen to what the respondent is actually saying; and developing the talent to direct the discussion to relevant topics without, at the same time, dictating the answers that respondent gives.

C. The Content of the Interactive Interview

a. Topical Questions

A list of topical questions can provide the researcher with an interview guide that serves to engage the informant, and to define the substantive terrain to be explored. In contrast to the standardized questionnaire, the interactive interview guide is advisory, more of a conversational agenda than a procedural directive.

An example of a topical question is “Why did you decide to purchase cattle?” Having a list of such topical questions will help to remind the interviewer of key topics that should
be covered. But we also need to be careful not to too many such questions. With too many topical questions, the conversation with the respondent may become just a set of short responses to a list of inquiries (becoming, in the process, much more like a survey questionnaire). The challenge is to come up with a limited number of such questions that get at the main issues, but that be presented in a conversation way without overly constraining the answers.

b. Scenarios

Many of the issues that the IAI project attempts to address concern processes that are highly complex and the elements of which are very difficult to treat in isolation of one another. For example, when a decision is made to invest resources to purchase cattle, the choice can have simultaneous effects in terms of a wide range of factors. It can change the division of labor within the household, or influence the choices made with respect to other forms of investment, such as planting perennial crops. It can benefit certain members of the household, but increase the burden of others, especially along age and gender lines. The presence of cattle may provide additional income, but at the same time require increased expenditures land clearing and pasture maintenance. And so on.

Faced with a complex issue of this kind, a potentially efficient way to generate information is by confronting the informant with a carefully constructed “scenario.” For example, “If you tomorrow you were the owner of another 10 head of cattle, how would this affect you and your family?”

A scenario like this one serves a number of functions:

- it focuses the informant on a complex set of relationships, allowing him the freedom to construct an answer according to an understanding of his own life circumstances;
- it stimulates the informant to adopt a particular point of view in order to activate the informant’s stock of knowledge;
- it positions the informant in relation to the issues; and,
- although it limits the discussion to set of issues of interest to the project, it also allows the informant to explore the topic from his own point of view, uncovering relationships and arriving at conclusions that are sometimes as much of a surprise to the interviewer as they are to the respondent.

The potential value of a scenario is also that it allows the respondent to indicate which are the most important implications in his/her mind. If we assume that the most important implications are those that are likely to be mentioned first, then simply the order of the respondent’s presentation tells us a great deal about his perspective. Note that this does not require the interviewer to actually ask “What is the most important implication?” While the latter may be an appropriate follow-up question in some circumstances, such a question may be difficult to explicitly answer.
A series of scenarios can be an effective way to encourage the informant to shift narrative positions, to assume different roles, and to explore different topics. While the scenario does not compel the informant to respond in a particular way, it nonetheless limits and focuses the discussion to those issues and relationships that are of primary interest to the project. Multiple scenarios are a way to systematically draw on the informant’s stock of knowledge that would be impossible to capture through a series of questions, however well they may have been constructed.

A well-constructed scenario has the potential to elicit from the respondent a discussion that, by its very nature, reveals complex relationships that may be at work. When we analyze responses to a good scenario, it may shed light on a whole range of issues and relationships that we would not otherwise be able to obtain. Put another way, the open-endedness of the scenario response is potentially much more insightful compared to presenting the respondent with a whole series of topical questions, and asking him to respond to each one. The latter approach would overly structure the responses, and would most likely put the respondent in a position that would make it less likely for him to talk about relationships between topics.

An effective scenario is one that:

- stimulates the respondent to address (in his or her own way) the concepts or relationships that are of priority importance to the research project;
- is readily understandable to the informant;
- is relatively easy and entertaining to answer;
- allows the informant to freely assemble his stock of knowledge according to his own perspective; but at the same time,
- constrains the discussion to a limited domain of issues.

c. **Specific Quantitative Questions**

The IAI method does not preclude the collection of quantitative data. However, the intent and the method differs from the conventional approach. As an example, consider important values such as the price that buyers pay for cattle, or the wage level for day laborers. In a survey method, the responses to the two questions would be averaged over all cases to provide an average estimate along with an associated standard deviation.

In our case, we the answer is determined by presenting the same two questions to a key informant. Using the redundancy principle, we repeat the question among additional key informants until we are certain that we have the correct answer.

In addition to the redundancy principle, we can also turn to concept of “triangulation” to derive accurate information about prices and wages. By triangulation we mean the process of asking the same question not only to key informants drawn from the same social group, but also among key informants who occupy different positions in the production and marketing system. Examples included informants who are landholders as well as informants who are truck drivers, day workers, and cattle buyers. When the
answers derived from different sources converge on the same value (triangulate), we can assume that the information that we have recorded is correct.

D. The Application of the Interactive Interview

The Interactive Interview can take place in three contexts:

1. An individual key informant can be interviewed in isolation.
2. A key informant can be interviewed in the presence of other members of a household, or other members of a firm or agency in which he is employed.
3. Several key informants can be brought together in a group. This method, sometimes called a “focus group.”

Focus groups typically have 6 to 12 members, plus a moderator. Eight people is the most popular size. If a group is too small, it can be dominated by 1 or 2 forceful individuals. If it is too large, it may be difficult to manage. The participants in the focus group should be more or less homogeneous and, in general, should not know one another. The task of the moderator is to get the group to feel that they are part of the discussion, and to direct the group conversation in productive directions, knowing when to intervene and when to keep quiet.

Focus groups are most effective when you are able to compare the reactions of at least two groups. For example, a focus group composed of small producers who are also male, may be a very useful source of information. However, a wide range of additional insights would surely come from the opportunity to compare responses with a focus group composed of women who are married to small producers. Similarly, focus groups that compare, say, small and larger producers could be yield important results.

C. Conducting the Interview: Additional Notes

a. Starting the Interview

It is important to explain the purpose of the interview, and to assure the informant of anonymity. It is also important to emphasize that the interviewer is trying to learn from informant. Permission should be obtained before using a tape recorder or taking notes.

b. Letting the Informant Lead

In the Interactive Interview the idea is to keep the conversation focused on a topic, but, at the same time, give the informant room to define the content of the discussion.

c. Probing

The key to successful interviewing is learning how to probe. That is, how to stimulate the informant to produce more information, but doing so without injecting yourself too
much into the interaction. In some instances the best probe is simply to remain silent, and to wait for the informant to continue. Often the ‘silent probe’ produces more information than does direct questioning.


