Collecting & Analyzing Interview Data

A. Collecting Interview Data

A. Tape Recordings and Note Taking

How the interviewer is to document the contents of the interaction with the respondent is a critically important issue. There are several methods to accomplish this, each with advantages and disadvantages. We can list the various options, beginning with the approach that is most complete and most time intensive.

1. Tape record the entire interview, and then transcribe the text word for word. The transcribed text then becomes the data that are analyzed.

2. Tape record the interview and take notes at the same time. Later review the tape and notes, occasionally writing down direct quotes that are deemed especially relevant. The tapes are kept as a record, but are not transcribed word for word.

3. Only take extensive notes during the interview.

Which of these methods we should adopt in the IAI study is something that we will need to discuss as a group. It would appear that the strategy 1 would involve far more investment of time and expense that we can afford. Strategy 3, on the other hand, may not be sufficiently reliable. Hence, strategy 2 may be the appropriate choice.

B. Taking Notes

Taking adequate notes is both a skill and an art. The ability to take good notes – ones that are understandable to others – is something that seems to come naturally to some people, while others find it more difficult. The ability to write at a fast pace is essential, but it is also critical to be able to hear what is being said, and record the information in a manner that is both legible and faithful to the respondent. Before an interview begins, it should be established who on the team is mainly responsible for this task.

The notes that are taken are the basis of all subsequent analysis. Hence, we need to develop standardized ways to treat them. The following is a check list of items that we should consider, and develop during the workshop:

1. Develop a standard form to record all notes.

2. The standard form should provide basic identification information (date, time, name of the interview, location, characteristics of the respondent, etc). The archiving system needs to sufficiently detailed that it will permit us to link the Daily Interpretive Analysis (discussed below) with the tapes and notes for the

corresponding interview.

3. Develop a consistent way to archive and store notes (perhaps in 3-wring binders; with duplicate copies to be made at the end of the field work).

B. Analyzing the Data

A. The Daily Interpretive Analysis

Perhaps one of the most critical – and undoubtedly one of the most painful – aspects of a qualitative methodology is the need for a designated team member to write a "Daily Interpretive Analysis." The objective of the DIA is to assemble and interpret the information that was collected. In other words, *at the end of every day of interviewing*, it is essential for a selected team member to review the notes and the tapes and to write a report that summarizes and interprets the information obtained. [1]

In order to justify the importance of the DIA, and to further explain its purpose and method, consider the following questions:

a. Why do we need DIAs?

One way to answer this question is to contrast our methodology with the traditional survey approach. When a standardized survey questionnaire is used, it is possible to code the responses to each item in the questionnaire at the end of the field work. Since the answers are standardized, the level of ambiguity is low, and it is not necessary to remember the particular context of the interview, or other things that the respondent may have said.[2] We can say that the *information is not fragile. By that we mean that the integrity of the data is not necessarily threatened by the passage of time.* It is also the case that the analysis of the data does not take place in the field, but only begins after the data have been coded.

In our case, the kind of data recorded on tape and in hand written notes provides an informational base that is extremely fragile. *It is fragile because, as time passes, it becomes increasingly difficult (probably at an exponential rate) to reconstruct information.* This is especially true with respect to the insights that you may have when listening to the respondent, or with respect to important relationships or connections that the respondent may express.[3] After a few days it becomes very difficult to fully interpret

[1] This can be done by the Team Leader, or by a designated individual. It may be useful for the team to first talk about the interview in order so that different perspectives and insights can be incorporated into the report.

[2] This the main reason that it is possible to contract a team of relatively unskilled individuals as interviewers. It is not necessary to know much about the topic or the context in order to properly apply a standardized questionnaire.

[3] This is the reason that the Interactive Interview approach requires interviewers who are very knowledgeable of the subject and the context.

handwritten notes that were taken, even in the case of very good notes. Similarly, there are flashes of insight that you may have when you listen to a respondent that may seem self-evident at the time, and may appear to be something that you will not forget. The problem is that such insights turn out to be very hard to remember. As time passes, they loose a great deal of detail and nuance.

The same principle applies to taped responses. Although it is tempting to think that a tape recording of an interview will faithfully recreate all of the information, this is not the case. A tape may be good at documenting factual data that you can retrieve by listening to them at a later time. However, a great deal of understanding comes from the context of the interview, and from a range of cues that are simply not captured on tape. And, more importantly, the moments of inspiration and clarity that you may experience during an interview are not likely to be re-created when you listen to a tape weeks or months later.

Finally, the strategy of drawing information from tape recordings at a later date has the inescapable disadvantage of forcing you to listen to tapes in their entirety, and probably more than once. This means that an interview that lasted three hours will take another three hours (or more) if you listen to it later on. The effect is to double the actual time spent on field work.

b. How do we know the insights and conclusions are valid, especially when we are early in the process, long before the study is completed?

The Interactive Interview is based on the assumption that the discussions with the respondents is a learning process that continues throughout the field work, from the first day to the last. Hence, it is very important to take the time to assemble the information received and to interpret and analyze the data as you go along. *The very act of writing the DIA is, itself, a potentially valuable learning tool* because it forces you to reflect on what has been learned. Such reflections will positively inform subsequent interviews that are carried out.

As noted earlier, one of the functions of the DIA is to document those flashes of insight, or preliminary conclusions, that you may have when you listen to a respondent. The tapes and notes are analyzed to show the dynamic interrelatedness of the various pieces of information that the respondent presents. The respondent's discussion is therefore much more than a collection of "reality reports," that simply require the interviewer to list. While concrete informational items are critically important, so to is the ways in which the respondent assembles aspects of his/her reality. Writing the DIA is therefore an analytically active enterprise, one of the functions of which is to take the respondents' discussion and interpret it with reference to the larger concerns of the project.

The insights or conclusions on any given day necessarily have a "provisional status." They are much like "working hypotheses" or "preliminary theories." Subsequent interviews and DIAs may lead you to alter, refine, or even reject some conclusions or understandings that you may have had earlier in the process. Similarly, you may use the

DIA to record an idea that is initially expressed as a vague notion, or a hunch, and later turns out to be one of major insights of the entire project. The only way to document and to keep track of these ideas is through the DIA.

c. How much information should be in the DIA?

There is no single answer to this questions, but there are several important guidelines. For example, *the DIA should be self contained*. In other words, it should contain all of the information that the interviewer deems important. The author should try to write the DIA in such a way that it will not be necessary to go back to the tapes or notes at a later date.[4] It should also be presented in such a way that (unlike field notes or tapes), the report can be read at a later date, and can be understood, even by persons who did not write the DIA.

The DIA can contain direct quotes from the respondent. If a respondent is particularly eloquent, or particularly insightful, or expresses an especially useful idea or relationship, it would be extremely valuable to *include direct quotes* in the DIA. Having the tapes to turn to will be helpful for this purpose.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that a key aspect of the research design is the comparative feature of the study (between large and small landholders; and between regions within Brazil, and between Brazil, Ecuador and Peru). When we get the point when we begin to carry out a comparative assessment of the data collected within different groups, and across different geographic sites, it could turn out that a critical observation is based on the absence of data. For example, consider a situation in which small farmers in place A consistently mention X, Y and Z as very important variables, but none of the small producers in place B do so. This will certainly alert us to fundamental differences between the two places.

It also means that, if at all possible, the DIA's should be *sensitive, not only to what is said, but also to what is not*. The latter, of course, becomes quite difficult to do for the simple reason that, at the outset of the study, we will not have a complete list of items to refer to. A provision checklist may help in this regard.

d. How can we expect to complete all the interviews needed if we have to spend so much time in the field writing the DIAs?

Like all hard decisions, there will be a trade-off between spending time doing a DIA or another interview. When making this choice, one thing that should be kept in mind is the fact that another interview without a DIA not likely to be very useful in the long run. This observation underscores the importance of the DIA. At the same time, it is important to complete as many interviews as it takes to address the questions. The

[4] It is unlikely that all of the DIAs will be so complete that it will never be necessary to go back to the tapes and notes. Hence, we should anticipate the need to go back to the original data sources, at least some of the time. This emphasizes the need to properly document and store the notes and tapes in such a way that we will know where to look, if we have to.

challenge, therefore, will be to complete a sufficient number of interviews that meet the objectives of the project and, at the same time, complete the DIAs that will make the subsequent analyses possible.

e. If you have ever done interviews in rural Amazonia, you know how tiring the process can be. At the end of the day, about all most people are up to is finding a beer. Is it realistic to expect someone to write such a report at the end of every day?

Allowing time for the DIA should be something that is explicitly built in to the field work strategy. It may take place at the end of day that is scheduled to end early. Alternatively, it may be preferable to spend the morning of the following day writing the DIA, or to accumulate 2 or 3 interviews before sitting down to write the report. Whatever strategy seems best at the time, in no case should the DIAs be postponed for more than a few days.

B. Format of the Daily Interpretive Analysis

Because there will be several teams in the field at the same time, and anticipating the need to carry out a comparative analysis, it is important that the DIA's follow a common format. The format will consist of at least three parts: (1) Record, (2) Analysis, and (3) Conclusions /Concerns.

Written notes taken during the interview and tape recordings of what was said will provide the raw materials for the report. In addition, a group meeting of the team may be an efficient way to benefit from the insights and observations of other participants in the interview who, because of their different areas of expertise, are likely to bring different interpretations into play. Similarly, a meeting of the team to discuss a draft of the DIA may play a similar positive role. These suggestion emphasize the idea that even if only one person actually writes the DIA, it is understood that the report is product of a group effort.

The report must be sufficiently complete, and written with sufficient clarity, that individuals who did not participate in the interview session can read and understand the document in the manner that the author intends.

1. Record (Relato): The first section is a written rendition of the information that was provided by the informant in the process of the interactive interview. The objective is to construct as complete a record as possible of what the informant said. The challenge is to record the information in a way that remains faithful to the informant's actual thoughts and words. It may be very useful to make use of the rape recordings in to review parts of the interview, and to clarify ambiguities that may be present in the written notes. The tapes may also be helpful in order to reproduce direct quotes that are particularly revealing about the informant's perspective, or that are of special relevance to the project objectives.

2. Analysis: Using the Record as a reference point, the second part of the DIA provides an analysis of the information. By analysis we mean interpreting the information provided by the informant and relating it to the main objectives of the study. In contrast to the Record, the Analysis section requires the active involvement of the analyst who is expected to reorganize the information, and interpret the interviews in meaningful ways. This may entail drawing connections between different ideas or processes that were mentioned in the interactive interview, even if these connections themselves were not explicitly noted by the informant. Similarly, this may involve identifying patterns of associations between variables, or noting the relationship between what an informant said and events that take place at the regional, national, or global levels.

   The objective of the Analysis Section of the DIA can be summarized as an attempt to interpret the content of the interactive interview in a way that relates the finds to the objectives of the project. A useful way to keep the various objectives in mind, is to keep in front of you accomplish this in the Analysis section of the DIA, it may be helpful to keep in front of you the various Figures – and any other materials that summarize the main concepts, relationships, and hypotheses that are central to this study.

   The Analysis Section of the DIA is explicitly intended to be a creative exercise that draws heavily on your background knowledge, your ability to listen with an open mind, and your capacity to link specific observations and particular pieces of information to more general concepts and relationships.

3. Conclusions and Concerns: In this section you are encouraged to go beyond the Record and Analysis to draw more general conclusions that you think may be warranted. Statements in the Conclusions and Concerns Section can be thought of as "working hypotheses" or "preliminary conclusions" that are worth keeping track of as the field work proceeds. The idea is to provide a place in the interpretation format for members of the team to capture and record those insights and revelations that so often come about in the process of interviewing people (but which are rarely recording as such).

   Observations in the C&C Section may have the important function of informing or revising the kinds of questions that are asked in subsequent interviews. In this way the observations C&C observations can serve to incorporate a learning process into the ongoing field work.

   This section of the DIA is also the place to record the Concerns that team members may have. For example, as the interviews proceed, it may become increasingly evident that some questions and scenarios do not work, that some of the ways we have conceptualized the issues may be flawed, or that important considerations are being excluded. Keeping a record of these concerns will provide important information for assessing the success of the project. These observations may also alert the team to ways to revise and improve the interviews, and the process of data collection and analysis.

Finally, it is essential that the report include information about the interview, and sufficient information to link the report to the field notes that were taken, and the tape recordings that were made. It is very important that this be done in such a way that the information cannot be associated with named individuals, and that the privacy of the informants is protected. Suggested content:

1. Date _____________
2. Time _____________
3. Location _____________
4. Team members present _____________
5. Interview Id # _____________
   (same # on associated notes and tapes)
6. Author of the report _____________