for respondent interviewing (in which the researcher may be more interested in the interviewee's subjective dispositions and reactions than in some objective "truth") it can be well worth while. The following selection by Dean and Whyte examines some of the specific threats to each type of interview data and reassesses the criteria pertinent to obtaining adequate data. (Note that in this selection the authors do not systematically distinguish informants from respondents.)

"HOW DO YOU KNOW IF THE INFORMANT IS TELLING THE TRUTH?"

JOHN F. DEAN AND WILLIAM FOOTE WHYTE

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

Threats to Interview Data

The primary threats to the interpretability of interview data can be broadly categorized as (1) the reactive effects of the interview situation upon the received testimony; (2) distortions in testimony; and (3) reportorial inabilities of the interviewee. Again, each of these categories encompasses many specific sorts of problems which must be taken up in some detail.

Most of the considerations in evaluating interview data seem to have focused on informant interviewing, asking how we can know whether the informant has given us an accurate account of some particular event. But, as J. P. Dean and W. F. Whyte point out, this is a somewhat oversimplified criterion for informant interviewing, 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. THE INFORMANT'S REPORT OF "SUBJECTIVE DATA" (A)

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 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 us 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 so 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, how-

ever, 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 wide-spread 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 of his organization or his own personal life should be put forward in a good more negative aspects of the situation.

(3) Does the informant have desires to please the interviewer so that his better race relations might well find informants expressing opinions more friends.

(4) Are there any idiosyncratic factors in the interview, an informant was told that she had changed her attitude toward her a wrong couch and she implied that he had tried to cheat her. She recalled in terms of it to the questions about Jews in the interview. A few days earlier idiosyncratic factors such as mood, wording of the question, individual such as the baby crying, the telephone ringing, etc., all may influence the way

Unless they are taken into account, these various factors that influence the interview situation may cause serious problems and misinterpretation of interview situation should be carefully structured and the interview itself should be avoided by arranging an appropriate time and place for interviews.

The influence of ulterior motives can sometimes be quashed by pointing that the researcher in no position to influence the situation in any way. the best guarantee of spontaneity, and informants who are important should express or, indicate in any way, his disapproval of state-intrude in the situation. Idiosyncratic factors of consultation and meaning are in many different ways so that the complex configuration that a person's sentiments represent 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 on 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 full 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. THE INFORMANT’S REPORTING OF “OBJECTIVE” DATA (8)

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 male 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 admissibility 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
illuminates 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
personal 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 indi-
cated 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 prejudiced 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 devel-
operment 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
researcher 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 main-
taining 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 be-
 tween 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: 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 sub-
sequent 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 communica-
tion 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 informa-
tion they report to the researcher. Even so, wherever the researcher has to
rest on secondhand reports he must be particularly cautious in his interpre-
tation.
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?”

Vidich and Bensman (1954) amplify the preceding inventory of sources underlying misleading statements by interviewees:

1. Purposeful intent. Interviewees may slant information in an attempt to influence the results of the research. Information may be dramatized to make the interviewee or his organization seem less prosaic. Excessive information may be given by reformers who want to use the research to expose and reform their organizations. Myths and rationalizations may be offered in order to cover up unpleasant truths. Information may be distorted to serve personal ambitions, self-aggrandizement, or self-protection, or even to serve in carrying on personal feuds. Stereotyped responses may be offered, based on rumors about the research heard in advance of the interview.

2. The temporary role of “interviewee.” All interviewees attempt to form an image of the interviewer and of the organization he represents. On the basis of this image, they often concentrate on providing that information which they believe will help the researcher to solve his particular problem, as they have defined it.

3. The psychology of the interviewee. Information communicated by the interviewee is influenced by the whole panoply of psychological processes—memory, attitudinal set, level of motivation, anxiety, fears, etc. Important among such factors are language style and vocabulary size, for if they are different from those of the researcher there can be considerable misunderstanding by both participants.

Research on the characteristics of good informants tends to support the above analyses of the sources of misleading interview statements. Ability to collect and retain information is found to be positively related to: length (but not recency) of exposure to the situation; level (but not type) of interest; and generalized perceptual ability. Ability to communicate information is found to be positively related to level of education. These key abilities are themselves highly correlated, for the informant who has the data well organized, well remembered, and well verbalized can more readily transmit the information to the researcher. Beyond ability, the informant’s level and type of motivation affect performance in the interview. Genuine interest in the aims of the research is found to be the most efficacious motive, followed by interest in the interview as conversation, with extrinsic or ulterior motives being least effective in yielding good interview data.

Withholding of information may be as troublesome to the researcher as are misleading statements and may stem from the same general sources. The following section, by Chris Argyris, examines in close detail many additional sources and signs of evasiveness in the interview situation, categorizing these roughly into those that are located in the individual interviewee and those located in the social organization itself.

DIAGNOSING DEFENSES AGAINST THE OUTSIDER

CHRISS ARGYRIS

In the previous articles, the authors have been concerned with problems of establishing and maintaining research relationships from the point of view of the research worker. It is the purpose of this paper to switch the discussion to the point of view of the subjects of the research. How do they react to being interviewed, observed, and in general, "researched upon"? What are some of the common defenses they seem to employ? Why do they employ these defenses?

The material presented below is drawn primarily from one researcher’s experience. As such it will be limited. We will further limit our examples to defenses that are commonly used during “in-plant” research in industrial organizations. Many possible examples related to unions, hospitals, and governmental agencies are not included. Furthermore, we will not discuss the defenses related to research conducted in the employee’s homes. In spite of these limitations, we believe that the examples we present will include many of the basic types of defenses that researchers experience in social organizations.

TWO SOURCES OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS

Defense mechanisms may be related to the personality of the subject vis à vis the researcher. They may also be related to the social organization as it is expressed through the individual. For example, it is possible for a subject to delay or refuse an interview because he fears all new psychological situations.


1. The writer expresses his debt to Robert Guest, Yale University, for his constructive suggestions and examples.