

## Interviews

Interviews are used when a researcher requires detailed information from a few people and is looking for explanations or descriptions of thought and behaviour. An interview takes the form of a dialogue between the interviewer and the subject. Generally, a number of questions are prepared before the interview; the interviewer may stay with these questions or allow the interview to develop according to the discussion that follows. Interviews are a useful tool for anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists alike.

## Observation

In everyday life, we use observation to learn about how people respond in certain situations. Observation techniques are also important in the social sciences—in psychology, sociology and anthropology. Methods that rely on observation have the advantage of helping researchers learn about people in their normal surroundings, or “in the field,” as social scientists say.

There are several methods of observation. **Unstructured observation** involves studying people without a predetermined idea of what to look for. A researcher may sit in a cafeteria or on a park bench and note what people do and say, open to anything that might occur. Unstructured observation allows for fresh insights and ideas, and provides new hypotheses

for further research. **Structured observation** involves planning beforehand what will be observed and noted, and keeping a list of things to look for. For example, a researcher studying the effect of car use on grades might observe a class and look for signs of fatigue or restlessness in students known to be car owners. The observer might also use content analysis, which is a particular kind of structured observation. In content analysis, a researcher will examine an area of interest—perhaps written materials, television shows or segments of a conversation or debate. For instance, a researcher may watch television commercials for cars to see how they appeal directly to young people. Usually a checklist is used to help the observer make notes and draw conclusions. You will learn more about content analysis in Chapter 17, Culture, Communication and Computers.

**Participant observation** is a technique used mainly by anthropologists. The researcher not only observes the group but also participates in the group’s activities—for short periods of time in one’s own society or for longer periods in other cultures. Anthropologists may live with people in another culture or country for as long as one or two years.

## Analyzing Data

The research methods we have discussed will all yield data that takes a variety of forms depending on the method chosen, for example, numbers and statistics from a survey questionnaire, a description of a structured observation or notes from an interview. The data, in itself, will not be useful unless it is organized and analyzed. It must be changed into a format that helps test the hypothesis and answer the question being asked—it must be turned into evidence.

### Steps to Analyze the Data

Analyzing data is a process that involves three steps:

- 1. Data should be separated into two categories: relevant and irrelevant.** Some of the data that has been collected may not have a bearing on the question or the hypothesis. This data can be discarded as irrelevant. The only data that is retained and used is whatever will address the question and support or negate the hypothesis.
- 2. Data should be organized in a way that makes it clear.** Unorganized information can become a random collection of facts and figures. Data can be organized in several ways: divide the data into information that either supports or negates the hypothesis; convert numbers into percentages; or put the data into a chart or a graph to determine whether it reveals any trends over time.
- 3. Data should be analyzed in terms of how it supports, or fails to support, the hypothesis.** This is a crucial step in research. Once the information has been organized, the researcher has to determine the extent to which it supports the hypothesis. This process involves dividing the data into three categories: information that supports the hypothesis, information that provides evidence against the hypothesis and information that neither supports nor negates the hypothesis.

## Drawing Conclusions

In the social sciences, a conclusion is an answer to the question being asked. It is also a statement of the degree to which the hypothesis is supported. Based on the hypothesis, conclusions can be divided into four categories:

1. The evidence supports the hypothesis.
2. There is some evidence in support of the hypothesis.
3. The evidence does not support the hypothesis.
4. The evidence supports an alternative hypothesis.

Which of these conclusions best fits the findings of your survey on student spending?

Social scientists should not be overly cautious when considering warranted or reasonable conclusions. On the other hand, they must never go beyond what is supported by the evidence. There are three general tests to check that a social science study has value: objectivity, relevance and validity. To be objective, the findings should not be coloured by the personal opinions of the researcher. To be relevant, the findings must relate directly to the problem. To be valid, all results must be accurate and reliable.

## Activities

### Understand Ideas

1. Create a chart showing the research methods used by social scientists. The five research methods will be your column headings across the top of your chart. Below each heading, write in point form two important characteristics that describe each method.
2. **a)** What steps are involved in conducting an experiment?  
**b)** Why is it important to have a control group?  
**c)** What type of problem or question is best suited to this research method?
3. How would you prepare to conduct an interview?

### Think and Evaluate

4. Which research method would you use to test each of the following hypotheses? Give reasons for your choices.
  - Teenagers have more leisure time than their parents.
  - Teachers ask more questions of the students in the front of the class than at the back.
  - Over 75 percent of students you meet in the school corridors will return a smile.
  - All school facilities are wheelchair accessible.
  - Students in the cafeteria tend to sit with people of the same culture.
  - Students who sit in the front row of the class get better grades than those in the back.
  - Girls in secondary school get better grades than boys.

### Apply Your Learning

5. Develop a hypothesis for each of the following questions. Suggest a research method that would be most appropriate for testing your hypothesis in each case. Why did you choose those particular methods?
  - Will students work harder for marks or for free time?
  - Are women better drivers than men?
  - Does more education bring higher income?
  - Are older or younger students more willing to follow school rules?
  - Do Canadian television shows reflect the cultural diversity of Canadian society?
  - Do most seniors in your community live independently, with their families or in retirement homes?
  - Do parents allow daughters less freedom than they give their sons?
  - Is there a relationship between school grades and having a part-time job?