Structured Interviewing and Self-completion Questionnaires
What is a structured interview?

- useful tool of quantitative research
- often used in social surveys
- standardized interview schedule
- each interviewee gets the same questions, in the same way, in the same order
- closed, pre-coded or fixed choice questions
- minimizes variation between interviews
Advantages of structured interviewing

1. Reduces error due to interviewer variability
   - differences in responses are due to ‘true variation’, not inconsistencies in the conduct of interviews
   - potential sources of error are reduced by standardization (question wording, memory, misunderstanding)
   - reduces intra-interviewer and inter-interviewer variability
   - greater validity of data?

2. Accuracy and ease of data processing
   - closed ended, pre-coded or fixed choice questions (limited choice of possible answers)
   - interviewer does not interpret responses before recording them
   - standardized coding frame reduces variability in coding procedure
   - reduces intra-coder and inter-coder variability
Interview contexts

- more than one interviewee
  - group interviews; focus groups
- more than one interviewer
- in person or by telephone?
- computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) and telephone interviewing (CATI)
  - more efficient filtering of questions
  - immediate data entry
Telephone Interviewing

*Computer-assisted*

- quicker and cheaper (no travel required)
- easier to monitor/evaluate
- reduces interviewer effect (no non-verbal cues)

*problems:*
  - some people do not own a telephone, are not contactable or are ex-directory
  - limited time and rapport?
  - cannot respond to non-verbal signs of confusion
  - less satisfying experience for interviewee
Conducting structured interviews

- know your way around the schedule
- introduce the research
  - spoken or written rationale
  - identify yourself, your employer, purposes of research and procedure of interview (e.g. valuable time)
  - ethical issues: anonymity, confidentiality, right to withdraw
  - opportunity for interviewee to ask questions
- building rapport
  - It can be difficult if limited time and little opportunity for discussion (closed questions)
- asking questions
  - keep to the schedule: even small variations in wording can affect responses
- recording answers
  - write exact words used by interviewee, or use fixed choice questions
Conducting structured Interviews

- clear instructions (examples, page 120)
  - some questions are not relevant to every interviewee
  - filter questions help interviewer navigate the schedule
- question order
  - every interviewee must get questions in the same order
  - general questions before specific questions
  - earlier questions may affect salience of later ones
  - first questions should be directly related to the topic
  - potentially embarrassing or sensitive questions towards the end
- probing
  - when respondent does not understand question or gives insufficient answer
  - non-directive probes: “mmm”, “can you say a bit more about that?”
  - repeat fixed choice alternatives
- prompting
  - interviewer suggests possible answers
  - show cards (page 124)
Conducting structured Interviews

- leaving the interview
  - thank the interviewee
  - debriefing should be minimal

- training and supervision
  - if researcher hires interviewer(s)
  - ensure that interviewers know the schedule and follow standardized procedures
  - assessment: examine completed forms, tape record a sample of interviews, call-backs to respondents
Problems with structured Interviewing

- characteristics of interviewers
  - gender, age, ethnicity, class (rapport)
  - can evoke socially desirable responses

- response sets (question order effect)
  - people may respond in consistent but irrelevant ways:
    - Acquiescence (agreeing or disagreeing to all questions)
    - Social desirability (interviewees reflect on the way their answers might be perceived)

- the problem of meaning
  - interpretivist critique
  - interviewer and respondent may not attribute the same meanings to concepts
  - the meaning of questions is not pre-given but rather constructed in the interview
  - interviewer and interviewee negotiate shared meanings: the interview as a social encounter
Self-completion Questionnaires
What is a self-completion questionnaire (S.C.Q.)?

- also called a self-administered questionnaire
- no interviewer present
- respondent writes answers on form
- returned to researcher or deposited for collection
- usually postal questionnaires
- can be distributed in person or by email
Comparing S.C.Q.s and structured interviews

- Self-completion questionnaires tend to be:
  - shorter and easier to follow
  - with fewer open-ended questions

- Advantages of self-completion questionnaires:
  - cheaper and quicker to administer (to widely dispersed populations)
  - absence of interviewer effects and variation
  - convenient for respondents

- Disadvantages of self-completion questionnaires:
  - cannot probe or prompt
  - can only ask salient questions
  - few open-ended or complex questions
  - respondent can see the whole questionnaire before answering (question order effects)
Comparing S.C.Q.s and structured interviews

- (more) disadvantages of S.C.Q.s:
  - cannot ensure that the ‘right’ person answers
  - cannot observe respondent’s environment
  - respondent fatigue if too many questions
  - excludes people with limited literacy skills
  - greater risk of missing data
  - lower response rate
Response rates of S.C.Q.s

- relatively low: risk of sample bias
- Mangione (1995): 60-70% = acceptable
- strategies to improve response rates:
  - monetary incentive
  - stamped addressed envelope (return postage)
  - covering letter (aim, reasons, motives, to offer the results)
  - reminders
  - clear instructions
  - attractive layout
Designing an S.C.Q.s

- uncluttered layout
  - neither too short and cramped not too long and bulky
- clear presentation
  - variety of font sizes, bold print, italics, and CAPITAL letters
  - but be consistent!
- use vertical rather than horizontal alignment of fixed choice answers (page 138f.)
  - less confusing to read
  - distinguishes questions from answers
  - respondent less likely to make a mistake
  - easier to pre-code
  - unless using Likert scale with a long list of items
Designing an S.C.Q.s

- clear instructions to respondent
  - how to indicate choice of answer (sign of the cross or tick)
  - can they select more than one answer? (“multiple choice are possible”)
  - Create filter, if a question don’t relevant for the respondent

- keep questions and answers together
  - don’t spread a question over two pages
  - put answers alongside each corresponding question
    - E.g. Do you regularly go to your gym?
      - More than once a week
      - Once a week
      - 2 or 3 times a month
      - Once a month
Diaries as a Form of S.C.Q.

- researcher-driven diaries (Elliott, 1997)
- alternative to structured observation in quantitative research
- Corti (1993) structured or free-text diaries
- structured diary
  - closed entries, like a questionnaire
  - time-use diary: records amount of time spent on different activities
  - reduces error due to memory problems
Examples of diary-based quantitative research

- Coxon (1994)
  - free-text diaries about sexual behaviour
  - provided more detail and context than questionnaires
  - showed time sequence of events and practices
  - helpful for sensitive or personal issues

- Crook & Lightfoot (2002)
  - time-use diaries about students’ activities
  - showed amount of time spent in different types of study
  - free-text sections were difficult to code
Guidelines for preparing a diary for quantitative research

- Corti (1993)
  - provide clear instructions for respondents about how to complete diary and how often
  - include model of a completed diary entry
  - provide checklist of items, events or behaviours to include in each entry
  - show blocks of time in columns
Evaluating diaries as a form of self-completion questionnaire

• Advantages
  - precise estimates of time spent on activities (valid, reliable data)
  - shows chronological order of events
  - useful for personal or sensitive issues

• Disadvantages
  - cost of producing diaries and monitoring completion
  - boredom, fatigue and attrition
  - failure to record details
  - selective inclusion of events