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Hearing AIDS for interviewing

John Mitchell and Hugo Slim

• Introduction

Rapid Rural Appraisal is a way of piecing together the parts of a jigsaw to try and give you a picture of a particular situation. Listening to people in informal interviews is a means of providing many pieces for this jigsaw. However, listening is difficult and interviewers can often 'mis-hear' and so miss important parts of the jigsaw. This mis-hearing happens often in informal interviews but there are ways in which improved hearing and wider sensitivity by interviewers can lead to better understanding. Two main ways are:

- always check and verify what you hear.
- don't always take answers literally, interpret what you hear with a bit of 'lateral listening'.

The following examples show some incidents of mis-hearing which were corrected by further probing, verification and interpretation (lateral listening). The first is an example of 'cultural mis-hearing'. The second is an example of the risk of 'half-hearing' when one only hears half of the answer one is given. The third is an example of 'non-hearing' when one receives an answer but treats it as a non-answer.

• Example 1- Cultural mis-hearing, Somalia 1988

There are many occasions when questions are interpreted by the interviewees within their own socio-cognitive frameworks which clashes with our own. This can lead to cultural mis-hearing and consequent mis-information. However, if the interviewers are open to the possibility that they might have mis-heard, this mis-information can be avoided.

One clear example of this came up in a recent socio-ethnographic survey of the Upper Juba Valley in Somalia¹. Part of the survey was aimed at understanding the land tenure system of riverine farmers.

Initial questioning followed official informants in assuming that ownership and rights to land were on an individual basis. Interviewees seemed to confirm this by appearing to acknowledge their individual rights to a particular piece of land. However, the interviewers' personal observations of the 'ratio of people to land made them question the possibility that so many people could own so little land. To verify this they set about measuring every field with claimants being interviewed. This revealed that many people had varying claims on the same piece of land.

At this point, the interviewers questioned what they thought they had heard and asked the question of ownership again. Further probing showed that the claims were in proportion to the genealogical distance from the claimant to the farmer. Several people could therefore be said to "own" a particular piece of land. This proved that contrary to official information received and to what the interviewers thought they had first heard from the farmers, land rights and tenure in the area were in fact fluid and evolving and not fixed.

In this example, there was a problem in picking up important information which was hidden and concealed by a clash of different cultural understandings of the idea of

¹ Mitchell, J. and A. de Waal, 1988. 'Socio/Ethnographic Survey -Baardheere Dam Resettlement and Compensation Plan for Inundated Reservoir Area'. Halcrow Fox Associates/World Bank.

“ownership”. The interviewers initially misheard the answer to their question but by ‘verification’ and listening again they were able to understand what was to be a vital piece of this particular jigsaw.

- **Example 2- Bearing through falsehood, Ethiopia 1989**

Some rural communities inevitably see interviewing as an opportunity. These are often people who have been interviewed before and so have developed interview ‘skills’. Other people can see interviewing as a threat -such as people who are living *in* fear and do not trust outside interviewers. In either case of opportunism or fear, people and communities can feed interviewers false information about needs, priorities and community activities. However, to hear only the false information would be to half-hear the answers given by these people. A better understanding of the community can be gained by also trying to hear the motives behind the false information.

One clear example of this occurred in an evaluation of community participation in a church development programme in southern Ethiopia². Several communities exaggerated their needs and their participation in community development projects and played down their receipt of relief items in recent months in an attempt to ask for more. Verification with project staff and relief records proved this to be false information.

Having established that the information they had heard was false, the interviewers tried to interpret what this false information revealed and why it had been given. In other words, what motives could they discern behind the false information. They began a bit of lateral thinking and realized that the false information they had heard signalled that these communities were becoming relief-dependent, were unmotivated and often ‘deaf’ to development messages. By not taking their original testimony at face value and by listening for deeper motives, the interviewers

² Mitchell, J. and H. Slim, 1989. MA Review of EECMY-SES Community Development Programme in Sidamo and Gama Gofa Regions of Ethiopia’. Rural Evaluations/Norwegian Church Aid.

therefore uncovered important information about these communities.

- **Example 3 -Getting no answer, Ethiopia 1985**

Very often, people have no answer to questions posed by interviewers. In these cases there is a tendency for interviewers to view this lack of all answer as ignorance and so to provide the answer themselves according to their own preconceptions. This is a particular kind of mishearing which again tends to view the answer as a non-answer and so dismisses it and replaces it.

In discussion about imminent food shortage with rural people in Ethiopia and Sudan³, interviewers asked questions about the build-up to, the severity of and the reasons for the expected crisis. These were enormous questions which people obviously could not answer in a nutshell. They often gave answers like “God knows” or it was “the will of God” or simply shrugged their shoulders. Interviewers initially considered this to be a non-answer and were tempted to take it upon themselves to interpret what had happened. This would have meant providing answers according to their own preconceptions and so ‘filling in’ the situation with their own analysis.

However, recent evidence from Darfur in Sudan has shown that people’s knowledge and understanding of famine is highly developed and much better than our own. In the initial questioning in Ethiopia, the interviewers had mis-heard the answer. “God knows” was a statement of faith but it is also a way of saying how complex the issues were and how the question could not be answered so simply. Further probing and questioning has begun to show that rural people’s perceptions of and understanding of famine is in fact a vast and complex area needing further research and a lot more listening⁴.

³ Mitchell, J. and H. Slim, 1985. Unpublished Reports, UN Emergency Office, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

⁴ De Waal, A. 1989. ‘Famine that Kills -Darfur Sudan 1984/85’. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
Young, H. 1988. Unpublished Oxfam Reports, Darfur, Sudan.

As this example shows, many short seemingly evasive answers are not 'non-answers' but flags which signal enormous complexity in the question and the impossibility of a quick answer. These short deflecting answers are also often related to fear or emotion which makes something too painful to talk about⁵. Openness to the improved hearing of these apparent non-answers gives a better understanding of how people view the question and should lead to renewed listening.

• Conclusions

These are a few examples of the many ways in which outside interviewers can mishear rural people. They show that an informal interview may not always produce the kind of 'direct information' which the interviewer aims to extract. It will however, always offer hints of other kinds of 'hidden information' which may be very revealing. For outsiders to overcome the problems of mishearing and uncover this hidden information, it is always necessary to check what one hears and to enter into a bit of lateral listening to interpret what at first may seem like 'non-answers'.

In our experience, there *is* no such thing as a bad answer or a bad interview, but only bad listening or half-hearing. The most awkward, silent and embarrassing of interviews (of which there are many) always mean something -the onus *is* on the interviewer to look for this meaning and to verify it. The interview examples above show that better hearing and more open-minded listening can enable interviewers to interpret what they hear and so understand the voice of rural people a little less imperfectly.

• **John Mitchell** and **Hugo Slim**, Rural Evaluations PO Box 3, Boscastle, Cornwall PL35 OHX, UK.

NOTE

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⁵ Mitchell, J. and H. Slim, 1990. 'Interviewing Amidst Fear'. In Press.