

4

The bias of interviews

John Mitchell and Hugo Slim

• Introduction

The informal interview is a very accepted medium in our culture but it is not so well understood in rural areas. People often find it a very strange way to communicate. Their surprise at the medium raises important questions about the 'informal interview' which is central to many interviewing techniques such as the semi-structured interview, which is used in Rapid Rural Appraisal.

As a means of talking and listening to rural people, the informal interview can be an important way of learning from rural people, but one that needs to be better understood by its practitioners. Apart from the many specific problems in interviewing we have experienced an inherent bias in the interview form itself. The very act of interviewing often seems to assume two things; namely that:

- questions always have answers; and,
- these answers can be given briefly.

These assumptions create a bias in the interview as a means of discussion and often work directly against the understanding rural people have about questions, answers and the nature of knowledge and information.

• The interview format

Most rural people are accustomed to the simple dialogue the free-for-all conversation or the formal set-piece speech. The medium of the short question and answer interview fall between these three types and is often strange to many people even absurd. The fact that interviews are often carried out through an interpreter obviously makes things doubly unusual.

Informal interviewing is therefore a difficult business. Questions are often met with uncomprehending silence or with a shrug or a chuckle as if to say - 'how do you expect me to answer that?' Answers to large questions like those about drought and famine are usually not even attempted but are very naturally referred to God. In our experience, the fact that one often does not seem to be getting through to people in interviews seems to be because the informal interview is often misunderstood by practitioners and interviewees alike. As a means of communication, it seems to have implicit assumptions, which go against the grain in rural people.

• The structural bias of the interview

There are two main structural biases in the informal interview - both of which seem to come from western ideas about 'answerability' and brevity. First, the interview tends to assume that answers to questions do usually exist and can be given - the idea that most questions are 'answerable'. Secondly, if answers are offered, the fundamental momentum of an interview is often towards a 'summing up' of issues rather than towards a 'talking through' of issues. Thus, interviews often have a tendency to try and put things in a 'nutshell'.

Expecting answers

The first bias which affects interviewing is the assumption of 'answerability'. Interviewers automatically expect answers to their questions. However, whether answers are possible hinges on people's idea of knowledge. This affects whether they think that 'answers' exist in the same way as we do and if they do exist, can they be packaged up

and spoken? People we have talked to seem to have an idea of knowledge as something very complex, something which one not only learns over time but which is also handed down through time and through the land. It is a mysterious thing which cannot be glibly articulated in response to quick questions. They realize very clearly that one cannot know everything and that the little one does know cannot be uttered in a moment. Often the implication is that if the interviewer wants to learn a little, he or she had better stay around - watching and living.

Questions are therefore considered to be big, open-ended things. Answers and understanding are not expected to come quickly and are not always assumed to be 'knowable' and 'speakable'. The wise person is often the silent person. 'Knowing' things is not necessarily equated with speaking them and the existence of answers is not taken for granted. Mystery, ignorance and the superiority of God's knowledge are acceptable. 'Answerability' is not always assumed. People often seem to live free from the illusion that there are answers to every question and as a result they find both the questionnaire and the informal interview a rather curious exercise. The pressure to find 'answers', which is implicit in the classic interview, is often not appropriate when talking to rural people for whom many questions continue unanswered, as mysteries or facts of life.

Nutshelling

The second cultural bias which can be implicit to an interview concerns the idea of brevity. Western ideas often consider the best answer to be the short answer. In our world of newspapers, radio and TV, job interviews and exams we are totally accustomed to the interview form. We are brought up with the habit of individual questioning and quick answers. Many people are used to having enormous questions fired at them in quick succession and are trained to be ready with fast, well packaged 30 seconds answers. The momentum of the great majority of media interviews and exams is towards a 'summing up'. Most radio or TV interviews which people listen to in the west are therefore driven by a desire to encapsulate, to render simple

and immediate. In our culture, a wise person is a person who can talk and answer questions in a brief and concise fashion.

In this way, interviews often aim to contract issues and to simplify them rather than to explore their complexity. This tendency is obvious in many interviews where pressing interviewers want to interviewee to 'put the issues in a nutshell' and encapsulate them for quicker, easier consumption. In this way, interviewing can tend to 'shrink' issues. This 'nutshelling' pressure is often alien to people in rural Africa where questions remain open, mystery is acceptable and brevity is not a necessary virtue.

• Conclusions

Recognition of the cultural bias of the interview is important in good interviewing. Being aware of the unusual pressures it puts on some rural people will make for better understanding. Interviewers will not be so discouraged when they get no short and direct answers or when issues are impossible to grasp immediately. They should not be alarmed if they seem to be 'talking round' issues but should be prepared to follow the course of the conversation and resist the temptations to make people 'nutshell' issues or to force them to come up with definite answers. Short, quick answers often give a veneer of simplicity which glosses over a great deal of complexity. If we are to be better listeners we must be patient and be aware of the strange bias in our questioning and in our expectations.

- **John Mitchell** and **Hugo Slim**, Rural Evaluations, P O Box 3, Boscastle, Cornwall PL35 OHX, UK.