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The use of the school essay as an RRA technique: a case study from Bong County, Liberia

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• Introduction

Researchers collect sociological data for rural development projects throughout the world, sometimes with inefficient or imprecise methods. Questionnaires and interviews are routinely used to ask people directly what they think and know about the conditions and events that affect them. Yet the results derived from these methods may be biased. Many have recognised the difficulties of information gathering (Olawoye, 1985; Opio-Odongo, 1985; Phillips, 1973; Gilmour, 1988; Chambers, 1980). Opio-Odongo is concerned with the “relationship between overt behaviour and questionnaires” and the “delicate nature of the interactions between sociologists as scientists and their fellow human beings as the objects of investigation”. Phillips discusses the bias due to modelling effects. He states, “Modelling can occur when the investigator consciously or unconsciously projects his own views (attitudes, opinions, or whatever) on those whom he studies”. However, he goes on to say that you cannot avoid biased data, for even “most studies of bias are themselves subject to possible biasing influences”. Another prevalent form of bias, strategic bias (Harris et al, 1989), occurs when a respondent believes he or she has something to gain from the interviewer or an agency associated with the interviewer. Bias can influence responses, leaving the researcher with the need to determine the validity of the collected data. We attempted to eliminate some of these biases by using the school essay method.

• The school essay method

Students are asked to write a brief essay on an assigned topic pertinent to development within their communities. They are given several days to think about the topic and discuss it with family and friends. The students are aware that the essay will be graded on clarity, neatness, punctuation, and grammar, and not on content. We applied this technique in Bong County, Liberia by sponsoring an essay contest for the eighth grade students of six local schools. Our selected topic was ‘What I Like and Dislike about Using a Latrine’.

The essay method is useful in that it reduces, if not eliminates, the role of the researcher as interviewer and so avoids the many biases of the interview technique. It gives the responsibility of the interviewer-interviewee relationship to the people being studied, but does not tell them that they have this relationship with one another. The student becomes the interviewer when he or she discusses the potential contents of the essay with family and friends. This relationship between interviewer and interviewee is more familiar and therefore less restrained, reducing not only the possibility of acquiescence and a response set (Opio-Odongo, 1985), but also the biases of the guided interview by an unfamiliar investigator. The interviewer-interviewee bias is further reduced because neither the students nor the people to whom they speak about the essays realize that they are the interviewers and interviewees, respectively. Further, the modelling is within the same culture and even the same social group (Phillips, 1973). The essay method is more effective than the open-ended interviews in the qualitative style studied by Bliss (1989)

because it is open-ended without a chance for discussion between the researcher and the respondents (both the interviewers and the interviewees), which reduces the possibility that the researcher might have some influence in what the respondents say. To some extent, the problem of reaching the illiterate people of the community is reduced. Although it is the literate students writing the essay, the researcher receives not only their responses, but also those of the illiterate people with whom the students have spoken.

Another important factor is that there is not just one interviewer, but many. This allows for different approaches to the topic and reduces the risk of the responses being slanted in any one direction as could otherwise be the case. In our study, we used 90 interviewers (i.e. students) in order to reach as many interviewees as possible. Through the large number of students involved, we were able to receive input from a significant portion of society. We selected six schools, three public and three private, to obtain a cross-section of the population in the area, and followed these 3 rules.

First, before beginning the contest, we consulted with the local educational authorities to secure their approval. To ensure that the contest had validity for the participants and kept them working within a familiar system, we used the name of the authority as the sponsor of the contest.

Second, we assigned the topic to the students several days before they wrote the essays. This permitted them to talk with each other and with their families about the possible responses.

Third, we provided clear instructions. We required that the essays be written in the classrooms to prevent anyone from bringing in

work that was not his or her own. The essays were one to two pages in length and were graded on the students' use of English grammar, neatness, and clarity of writing. It was made clear that content was not an issue to be considered when the essays were graded. This step was taken to encourage students to write honestly and without concern as to whether their answers would please the grader. This reduced the chance that strategic bias would have a noticeable effect on the answers. Instead of being rewarded for 'correct' answers, the students won the contest because they had the best English skills.

One month after initiating the contest we collected the essays, graded them and awarded prizes. The reward consisted not only of recognition for academic achievement, but also of cash prizes to be used for school tuition. The cash prizes were intended to increase voluntary participation in the contest. For other development projects, particularly those which are just being initiated, the prizes and essay contest can generate positive attention and goodwill.

• **Contents of the essays**

We received ninety essays from the six schools. In total, the essays contained 535 separate likes and dislikes. The responses were varied and so, for analytical purposes, we grouped the responses into five broad categories: structural, cultural, health, economic, and environmental reasons. The number of responses are shown in Table 1, grouped by school and response category. Structural reasons deal with the construction and physical maintenance of the latrine. Cultural reasons are those which relate to values of the community. Health, economic, and environmental categories are self-explanatory.

Table 1. Responses to school essay contest by category and school

Reason	School						Total
	Massaq uoi	Bakalu	St. Mark's	Phebe	St. Martin's	Gibson	
Cultural	23	3	3	29	8	12	78
Health	45	16	37	40	11	15	164
Environmental	63	3	4	107	5	24	206
Economic	1	0	0	15	7	0	23
Structural	6	4	2	37	12	3	64
Total	138	26	46	228	43	54	535

Before writing their essays students have had the opportunity to interact with each other and other members of their community. While we received many essays from each school, it is better to analyse the group of essays from each school as one single composite essay which is the synthesis of the community conversations which preceded the writing. The situations or feelings described in the responses must be shared by many people.

The most obvious feeling was that the majority of the people did not like latrines. Understandably, they especially disliked dirty latrines. Some students were aware of the health dangers of a dirty latrine saying, "it gives you many kinds of disease", "you might get other persons disease", and more specifically, "[Flies] sit on our faeces then again sit on our food and this most of the time leads to running stomach". Other students just knew that they did not like the waste to be on the floor, walls or seat. One student wrote, "If my restroom is very dirty I will not allow any one to enter it, because if the person go there he will always like to talk about you bad".

There were other reasons why they disliked latrines. Structurally, the latrine could be unsafe for children. As one student puts it, "Children often fall in the hole". Others wrote, "it last too long" and "it keeps bad odour around when full". Some students were concerned about privacy, saying, "some.....does not have door at all". In these examples the essay method has discovered problems that can be solved technically. Better planning can go into building the latrines so that they do not have holes large enough for a

child to fall into them, they can be better designed so that they last longer and can be moved when the hole is full and the hole can be more securely sealed after it is full to prevent the bad smell from escaping. A door is a simple addition, though it is a question of maintenance as to whether or not the door will remain attached.

Another observation made by the students was that they did not like a latrine to be located near a well. They know that "It is also not good to build a latrine near a well because when you do so, then the well will absorb the water from the latrine which create germs in to your drinking water that may affect you and your family with a great deal of diseases". Again, this identified problem can be avoided by good planning.

We also learned that some of the reasons why the people do not like latrines are false. Therefore, some of their dislikes can be overcome with some basic education on the facts about latrines. One such false belief is that the bad odour of the latrine can give you sickness. One student writes, "people will also get germs from the air and get some sicknesses". Another writes, "I don't like to use latrine because the vibration of an air from the hole is very contagious". The fear that the air of the latrine can make a person sick was an unexpected response. Other responses were just as surprising.

Understandably, the reasons with cultural influence were the most unpredictable and unexpected. A latrine is appreciated by some people because "it contributes to the

my visitors to carry my good name and also my parents who always like to visit me". Fortunately, the culture-based reasons tend to be more positive than negative and can, therefore, be considered guidelines for continuing the development project.

However, problems represented by the negative responses need to be solved before the program can be successful. For example, some of the students listed fear of physical harm by man or animal as reasons why they disliked the latrines. Many mentioned the danger of visiting the latrine at night. One student explains his fear saying, "you will be afraid to come outside to use the latrine at night because some time you will be attacked by some hard men and that is one of the main thing that I don't like about latrine". The student refers to 'hard men', actually heart men, hired assassins who are most dangerous to the healthy young boys of a village or town. The fear of heart men is as legitimate as that of snake bite, though not as frequent, and must be dealt with according to local custom combined with common sense.

These types of cultural 'dislikes' can cause the greatest problems for rural development projects. They are usually less physically obvious and require the most sensitivity in project implementation. The problems may not be part of an interview with set questions if the interview designer is from outside the culture. Even in an open-ended interview people could be more reluctant to discuss their cultural likes and dislikes if they know it is being recorded for outside observation. The essay method may uncover otherwise hidden cultural reasons for project success or failure.

In addition to the primary advantages discussed above, the method is as Chambers (1980) would phrase it, 'quick and clean'. Our study required less than one month and the only cost incurred was the small expenditure for prize money. Further, the method can generate positive publicity for the sponsoring ministry, agency, or development project. Finally, the method is versatile enough to be

used during most stages of a development project.

However, the essay contest should not be extended beyond its capabilities. It is unlikely to yield useful quantitative data. The method gathers a list of reasons, but rarely will it be able to explore any of the reasons in depth. It may be best to use the method in conjunction with other survey techniques. Reasons cited in the essay can be a starting point for more participatory discussions, beginning with the more obvious reasons and working towards the less obvious.

• Conclusions

Despite the limitations listed above, the essay method can be useful in discovering the reasons why people like or dislike a development project. The method's primary advantage is its ability to obscure the roles of interviewer and interviewee. This property makes the essay contest a useful tool for applied sociologists studying the cultural aspects of rural development.

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