

## THE COST OF INTERVIEWS IN PROGRAMME EVALUATION

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The interview is often cited as a major method of data collection by advocates of recently developed evaluation strategies derived from anthropology, ethnography and sociology, such as illuminative, responsive and transactional evaluation (Parlett and Hamilton, 1976; Rippey, 1973; Stake, 1975). In addition, irrespective of their overall strategy, most evaluation studies currently pay attention to a programme's context and its processes and typically rely upon interviews to obtain much of this information. There is little doubt, then, that interviews are being used more and more frequently in programme evaluation. Yet, a lack of information on the costs of interviews tends to restrict the realistic appraisal of their value in each aspect of an evaluation study compared with alternative methods of data collection.

There are currently pressures within evaluation circles which will tend to make interviews even more costly. The philosophical stance of many evaluation authorities who advocate a more active role for programme participants and informants in the control of evaluation study information has promoted the idea that a process of interviewee validation of the information derived from interviews should take place (McDonald, 1976). Such a process will inevitably increase the time and other resources required to prepare interview data for analysis and interpretation.

Thus, it is now apposite to examine the various sources of interview costs in programme evaluation studies. It is the purpose of this paper to do so and concurrently to provide an indication of the extent of these costs using information from two recent evaluation studies. This paper may be seen as contributing to a programme of research of the evaluation process (Straton, 1977) which aims to provide insight into this process and information which is useful in making decisions about the design and conduct of evaluation studies.

### The Sources of Costs in Interviews

It is possible to distinguish two major types and seven sources of the cost of interviews in programme evaluation. The two types of cost may be characterised as 'soft' costs, primarily personnel time but with links to data quality, and 'hard' costs such as the cost of materials, audio-tapes, stationery and travel. Hard costs usually involve a direct expenditure of funds from the project budget and can be determined explicitly. Soft costs are often felt more subtly. Project staff normally have a wide range of functions of which tasks related to interviews form only a part. Thus, more staff time spent on interview tasks may adversely affect other aspects of the study and these "costs" will be difficult to

assess.

Furthermore, the quality of interview data will tend to be a function of staff training, expertise and motivation as well as of time spent. Where project staff have deficiencies in their training, level of expertise or motivation, there will most likely be an indeterminate project cost in terms of data quality or information yield from the interviews as Hutter, et al (1977) have shown. Nevertheless, staff time spent on interview related tasks is a very important component of interview costs.

The sources of interview costs can conveniently be related to the steps in the process of data gathering through the use of interviews. The seven sources of costs are as follows:

1. Preparation of Interview Schedules: The development of the interview schedule will largely involve professional staff time and this will be the major soft cost. Other soft costs will include secretarial items for typing and related tasks. Printing, stationery and other secretarial time will usually comprise the main hard costs.
2. Identification of Interviewees: Identifying potential interviewees, sampling and making contact by letter or telephone will usually involve professional staff time with secretarial time being spent on typing and scheduling interviews. Hard costs will come from stationery and telephone and postal charges.
3. Travel: This will involve interviewer time as the main soft cost and mileage and parking charges as the main hard costs where interviews are to be conducted locally. Out-of-town interviews may involve bus, air, rail or taxi fares and accommodation costs. In this latter case, interviewer travel time will tend to be greatly increased.
4. The Interview and 'On-Site' Activities: The time taken for the interview itself normally will be only a part of the total 'on-site' time. Often a substantial amount of interviewer time will be spent in waiting, speaking with superiors, colleagues or staff of the interviewee, locating a suitable room and getting set up, establishing rapport, pausing for interruptions, having a tea or coffee break, having meals, inspecting the site, observing and so on. While some of these activities may be related to the overall purpose of the evaluation study they will often not be of high priority. The hard costs at this stage are probably limited to audio-tapes and tape recorder batteries.
5. Treatment of the Transcript: At this stage, the costs will vary considerably depending upon the particular procedures adopted. These might vary from simply filing the notes made during the interview for

later analysis to the typing up of a full verbatim transcript from the audio-tape recording of the interview. Often a summary will be prepared from the audio-tape and any notes made during the interview. The soft costs incurred at this stage will include professional staff time and secretarial time. Technician time may be involved where a duplicate is made of the interview audio-tape. Hard costs would include stationery, other secretarial supplies and duplicate audio-tapes.

6. Information Validation: In order to validate the interview information a transcript or summary would usually be returned to the interviewee for comment. Soft costs would be incurred here by professional staff for letter writing and the review of the interviewee's comments and by secretarial staff for typing and photocopying. Hard costs would include stationery and postage. Where the interview material is returned to the interviewee personally there will be soft and hard costs related to travel instead of postage.

7. Data Handling and Analysis: Again at this stage, a variety of procedures might be used with different cost implications. The simplest approach might be to extract the main issues, opinions or facts from the transcript material. However, more complex content analyses, coding on several variables and statistical analyses might be undertaken. Professional staff time, keypunch time and consultant time might all be used. Hard costs could involve stationery, coding sheets and computer cards.

In planning an evaluation study a knowledge of the relative importance of each of these sources of interview costs and their budget implications is significant information for making decisions about study design.

#### Sample Interview Costs from Two Evaluation Studies

The costs of interviews will, of course, differ from interview to interview and from study to study. However, an examination of the costs incurred for interviewing in two recent evaluation studies gives an indication of both the magnitude and the relative significance of the various sources of costs which can be expected in the Australian context. These studies are a national study of curriculum development processes and a local study of an innovative professional training programme. Both studies have relied heavily upon interview data with interviewees coming from various groups associated with the programme of interest and with several persons being reinterviewed at different stages of the programme. Over sixty interviews have been conducted in each evaluation study.

#### Interview Costs in a National Study

This study has involved three main rounds of interviews. A total of thirty interviews were conducted in the second round by the professional research officer associated with the study and it is these interviews which have been used for estimating costs. The interviews were conducted in every capital city in Australia, including Darwin, as part of a single journey in the spring of 1978.

A detailed list of the costs of these interviews is given in Table 1, broken down by source and type of cost. No estimates have been made of the costs of preparing the interview schedules or of data handling and analysis as these are likely to be very project idiosyncratic. Although a total of thirty interviews was conducted the number of times a particular procedure was completed varied considerably. For example, only twenty-seven interviews were tape recorded due to the prevailing circumstances, and only twenty-three initial letters were sent, since a single contact person often arranged more than one interview. Nevertheless, when estimating the dollar cost per interview, the interviews are taken as a set and the aggregate cost is divided by thirty.

All costs are those prevailing at the time that the particular activity was completed. The soft costs, of professional time and secretarial time, include a 15 per cent loading for salary services, i.e. they are the actual costs to the project.

It will be clear from Table 1 that the dollar cost per interview for this set of interviews was a very substantial \$117.05. In fact, the cost would have been considerably greater than this as the professional research officer was paid for 18 full working days while away conducting the interviews. If one includes an estimate per interview of this cost (\$40.37) instead of the local travel and on-site costs (\$2.69 + \$17.34 = \$20.03) the overall cost per interview rises to \$137.39. On the other hand, deleting the interstate transport and per diem costs and reducing the telephone cost to, say, 39c gives an estimate of the cost of these interviews had they all be conducted locally, i.e. \$65.89.

The relatively high interviewer costs deserve special comment. In this study a person with a high level of training and considerable experience in education was required because the interviewees were to be education officers in the curriculum or research branch of each State and Territory education authority, school administrators, teachers and college lecturers. In addition, a high level of competence, independence and professional integrity was required. Thus, a relatively high salary level was necessary to obtain the services of an appropriate person. In the second study, many of the same attributes were required of the interviewer but it was possible to use a less experienced person with consequently lower costs.

#### Interview Costs in a Local Study

In this study, interviews have been conducted with students and their lecturers in a professional training programme. The thirty-seven interviews conducted by the graduate research assistant have been used for estimating costs. The interviews were all conducted locally in the autumn of 1979, usually at the training site and typically several interviews were conducted during each site visit. Another cost saving feature was that staff of the host institution made the initial contact with the interviewees in most cases and scheduled the interviews.

The cost of these interviews is given in Table 2. The breakdown of the costs is the same as that for the National Study except that costs were not available for the information validation process which was still underway. However, these are likely to be similar to those in the National Study (See Table 1). If this estimate is used the total cost per interview rises from \$43.77 to \$49.60

TABLE 1

Interview Costs By Source of Cost for Thirty Interviews in a National Evaluation Study

Source of Cost	Aggregate Cost (Natural Units)	\$ Cost/Interview (1978)
1. Preparation of Interview Schedules (No estimate made)		
2. Identification of Interviewees:		
i) Soft Costs		
a) Professional time	7 hours	\$ 2.09
b) Secretarial time <sup>a</sup>	4 hours	.59
ii) Hard Costs		
a) Stationery <sup>a</sup>	23 letters	.05
b) Telephone	5 local; 28 long distance	5.39
c) Postage	23 local	.15
		\$ 8.27
3. Travel:		
i) Soft Costs		
a) Professional time (Local while interstate)	9 hours	2.69
b) Professional time (Total interstate)	23 days (18 working)	[ 40.37 ]
ii) Hard Costs		
a) Local transport (bus,taxi)	\$ 43.20	1.44
b) Interstate transport (air)	\$731.20	24.37
c) Per diem	\$653.80	21.79
		\$ 50.29
4. Interview and On-Site Activities:		
i) Soft Costs		
a) Professional time	58 hours	17.34
ii) Hard Costs		
a) Audio-tapes (C90)	28 tapes	1.45
b) Batteries	4 'C' batteries	.04
		\$ 18.83
5. Treatment of Transcript:		
i) Soft Costs		
a) Professional Time <sup>b</sup>	93 hours	27.81
b) Secretarial Time <sup>a</sup>	27 hours	3.95
ii) Hard Costs		
a) Stationery <sup>a</sup>	135 pages	.18
b) Photocopies <sup>a</sup>	270 pages	.35
c) Audio-tapes (C90)	28 tapes	1.45
		\$ 33.74
6. Information Validation:		
i) Soft Costs		
a) Professional time <sup>b</sup>	16 hours	4.78
b) Secretarial time <sup>a</sup>	5 hours	.73
ii) Hard Costs		
a) Stationery <sup>a</sup>	27 letters	.05
b) Photocopies <sup>a</sup>	135 pages	.18
c) Postage	27 local	.18
		\$ 5.92
7. Data Handling and Analysis (No estimate made)		TOTAL \$117.05

<sup>a</sup>Estimated from a parallel set of ten interviews.

<sup>b</sup>Estimated from a parallel set of 22 interviews.

TABLE 2

Interview Costs by Source of Cost for Thirty-Seven Interviews in a Local Evaluation Study.

Source of Cost	Aggregate Cost (Natural Units)	\$ Cost/Interview (1979)
1. Preparation of Interview Schedules: (No estimate made)		
2. Identification of Interviewees:		
i) Soft Costs		
a) Professional time	3 hours	.50
b) Secretarial time <sup>a</sup>	1 hour	.12
ii) Hard Costs		
a) Stationery <sup>a</sup>	1 letter	.05
b) Telephone	10 local	.02
c) Postage	1 local	.01
		\$ 0.70
3. Travel:		
i) Soft Costs		
a) Professional time (Local)	22 hours	3.64
ii) Hard Costs		
a) Local transport	835 km	3.23
		6.87
4. Interview and On-Site Activities:		
i) Soft Costs		
a) Professional time	62 hours	10.26
ii) Hard Costs		
a) Audio-tapes (C90)	37 tapes	1.55
b) Batteries	8 'C' Batteries	.06
		11.87
5. Treatment of Transcript:		
i) Soft Costs		
a) Professional time	108 hours	17.86
b) Secretarial time <sup>a</sup>	37 hours	4.39
ii) Hard Costs		
a) Stationery <sup>a</sup>	185 pages	.14
b) Photocopies <sup>a</sup>	370 pages	.39
c) Audio-tapes (C90)	37 tapes	1.55
		24.33
6. Information Validation: (No estimate made)		
7. Data Handling and Analysis (No estimate made)		
	TOTAL	\$ 43.77

<sup>a</sup>Estimated from a parallel set of ten interviews.

To facilitate a comparison of the costs of interviews in these two studies the percentage of total cost which is attributable to each source is given in Table 3. Two sets of figures are given for the National Study, one with the interstate costs included and the other with the interstate costs excluded. It is clear from Table 3 that the distribution of costs in the National Study in this second case is very similar to the distribution for the local study. Personnel time is by far the greatest source of cost accounting for 90 per cent and 84 per cent respectively in these two studies. The very substantial interstate travel costs in the National study change this balance considerably, of course, reducing personnel time to 51 per cent of the total cost of each interview. It should be noted that this figure could show a significant change as the numbers of interviews undertaken changed due to the fixed interstate travel costs even though local travel and per diem costs would tend to change with the number of interviews. It should also be noted that travel costs would be essentially the same irrespective of which capital city was the 'home base' for the study.

### Discussion

The experience reported in this paper indicates clearly that within an evaluation study each face to face interview is likely to involve a very substantial commitment of resources. Other authors have also mentioned cost as being a major drawback to the use of interviews (Backstrom and Hursh, 1963; Kerlinger, 1973) although attempts to identify the sources and the extent of interview costs are rare. Smith (1975) refers to one such attempt by Sudman (1967) who, he claims, has shown that in 1965, "total costs for interviewing ranged from \$17 to \$21 per interview in most survey organisations" (Smith, 1975, p.197). After adjusting for inflation at 7 per cent per annum this estimate becomes \$44 to \$54 in U.S. currency which is similar to the estimates given in this paper, especially since it is unlikely that Sudman included an information validation stage.

Overwhelmingly, the costs of interviews are related to personnel time, particularly professional research assistant and interviewer time. Yet it is precisely this aspect of the interview, the 'personal contact', which is seen as one of its main attributes by those who advocate its use. In the National study referred to earlier several interviewees expressed their appreciation at having been interviewed rather than being asked to complete a questionnaire. But one pays dearly for the privilege of having this personal contact.

Evaluation studies are characterised by their limited resources and trade-offs between different aspects of the evaluation process. A saving of resources in one area will allow more extensive data gathering, analysis or reporting, or better quality data, in another area. Thus, it is recommended that in planning an evaluation study the possibility of utilising less cost intensive methods of data collection than interviews should be carefully considered. This is particularly important where there is a need for a wide variety of perspectives to be gathered on the programme of interest. Among the alternatives to be considered should be telephone interviews and open or closed mail questionnaires. However, some of the information which one might seek to obtain through direct interviews may be obtainable indirectly from an informant or from existing records.

Where interviews are to be used it is recommended that steps should be taken to ensure that they are maximally efficient in their information gathering. A period of training in relevant



TABLE 3

Percentage of Interview Costs Attributable to Each Source for a National and a Local  
Evaluation Study.

Source of Cost	Percentage of Total Cost		
	National Study		Local Study
	Interstate Included	Interstate Excluded	
1. Preparation of Interview Schedules (No estimate made)	-	-	-
2. Identification of Interviewees			
i) Soft Costs	2	4	1
ii) Hard Costs	5	<1	<1
3. Travel			
i) Soft Costs	2	4	7
ii) Hard Costs	41	2	6
4. Interview and On-Site Activities			
i) Soft Costs	15	26	20
ii) Hard Costs	1	2	3
5. Treatment of Transcript			
i) Soft Costs	27	48	44
ii) Hard Costs	2	3	4
6. Information Validation			
i) Soft Costs	5	8	12 <sup>a</sup>
ii) Hard Costs	<1	<1	<1 <sup>a</sup>
7. Data Handling and Analysis (No estimate made).	-	-	-
TOTAL	101	99	99

<sup>a</sup>Estimated from the National study costs.

interviewing skills for the interviewers can be important here. A study by Hutter, *et al* (1977) with students in a paramedical professional training programme found that those who had completed an interviewing course used considerably more of the process skills defined as necessary for positive interview interaction than did a group who had not taken the course (86 per cent and 62 per cent respectively). In addition, the groups differed quite substantially in the proportion of all available data which was gathered (76 per cent and 47 per cent respectively). Structured interviews are also likely to be more efficient than semi-structured or unstructured interviews in their information gathering in many circumstances. Given the high cost of conducting interviews it is important that as much of the significant programme information be gathered during the interview as it is possible to do.



A third and final recommendation is that alternative strategies should be considered for each stage of the interviewing process within an evaluation study. This will allow the most cost effective procedure to be chosen for each stage of the process and for each interview or group of interviews which is to be conducted in the study. The use of a structured interview schedule, for instance, should lead to significantly reduced costs at the transcript treatment stage. This stage accounted for about half of the estimated interview costs in the local study referred to earlier, thus providing considerable scope for cost saving. However, the interviewing and the information validation stages might well be other places where costs could be saved significantly.

While the costs of interviews in programme evaluation has been the focus of this paper it began by referring to evaluation strategies in which the interview is often seen as a major method of data collection. The fact that interviews have been found to be so costly should encourage evaluation consultants to consider most carefully whether it is, in fact, appropriate to adopt an illuminative, responsive, transactional or similar type of strategy. In a recent empirical comparison of a responsive and a preordinate evaluation study of the same programme audience members rated the responsive study more highly on several important dimensions. However, the preordinate study, in which data gathering was done largely by questionnaire, cost a total of \$US 570 compared with \$US 6,000 for the responsive study (Schermerhorn and Williams, 1979). Thus, one would need to be convinced that there would be significant advantages in terms of audience understanding or decision making in relation to the programme before the more expensive approach was adopted. Similar considerations should apply when considering the interview as a method of data collection in evaluation studies.

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