

4-4 Psychology research methods

4-4a Questionnaires and interviews

If we are interested in what people think or feel, or in behaviours that are difficult to observe in humans, we need to *ask* people about themselves. This is a variant on introspection, in that researchers are not looking inside themselves but are using the best possible means to obtain other people's introspections. Psychologists do this through both questionnaires and interviews. Many of you will have filled in questionnaires from market researchers on the street or at home.



Figure 1 Example of a questionnaire interview

Questionnaires are written questions designed to elicit short answers or choices between options. They can be completed whether or not the researcher is there and so can be used with thousands of people in a study. For this reason they are usually tightly structured, with questions asked in an invariant order and often with the range of possible answers worked out in advance so that the data can easily be entered into a computer for statistical analysis.



Figure 2 Example of a group interview

Interviews are face-to-face conversations between a researcher and an interviewee or group of interviewees. Since they are face-to-face, samples used are usually smaller than for questionnaires. Interviews can be tightly structured (as for questionnaires) or more open-ended. They can, therefore, be analysed either quantitatively and statistically, or qualitatively,

where researchers transcribe tape-recordings of the interviews, read them repeatedly and analyse their themes.

4-4b Psychological tests

The most commonly used *psychological tests*, such as intelligence tests and personality tests, are highly structured forms of self-report where participants have to solve problems or choose from fixed alternatives on a questionnaire. Researchers then work out a score for each participant that gives information about their intelligence or personality. These tests are different from ordinary questionnaires in the way they are constructed and pre-tested. They are tried out on large numbers of people before being used as research or diagnostic tools. This gives a picture of how the test scores are distributed across the population for which the test is designed. It is, therefore, possible to compare a particular individual's test scores with the average from the population and to make statistical comparisons between different groups.

4-4c Observations

Observations are the most direct method of getting information about people's behaviour. In everyday life we all frequently observe other people. Psychologists have devised a range of methods for systematically observing other people. These range from participant observation through to highly structured and targeted observations. In *participant observation*, the researcher is part of what is being observed and writes up notes whenever possible. Sometimes these notes include an insider viewpoint account of how the researcher is feeling. A well-known example is that of Rosenhan and seven collaborators in the 1970s who, although not ill, feigned mental illness and managed to get themselves admitted to a psychiatric hospital (Rosenhan, 1973). Once in the hospital they behaved 'normally', i.e. as they would in the outside world. They kept notes of all they observed (outsider viewpoint) and what they experienced (insider viewpoint), including the experience of having their 'normal' behaviour and talk interpreted as evidence of their mental illness. (They had a lot of trouble getting discharged from the hospital.) The data from observations such as these are analysed qualitatively, paying attention to meanings and to the place of the researcher in the observation.

In more *structured observations*, researchers may have clear categories of behaviour on which they know they want to focus. They may choose a specific individual such as a target child in a school, perhaps counting the number of times that child makes a friendly approach to another child and noting down what is said. They may also observe through a one-way mirror so that they are not visible to the people being observed and, hence, do not interfere with whatever is being observed. These kinds of observations can be analysed either quantitatively and statistically, or qualitatively.



4-4d Meaning and language-based methods

In recent years many psychologists have become interested in language as an important human ‘product’. There are various ways in which psychologists analyse conversations, data from interviews and written texts. One of the most popular methods is *content analysis*, which involves counting up the prevalence and sequencing of certain words, sentences, expressions, metaphors, etc., in texts such as newspaper articles or transcripts of interviews. It can also be used to identify the types of explanations people give for their own behaviour or use in order to persuade people to support them or agree with their argument. It is predominantly a quantitative method.

Another popular method is *discourse analysis*. This is a qualitative method that provides detailed analyses of exactly what language is used and how it is used. For example, discourse analysts would try to identify the rhetorical devices by which we all as speakers seek to persuade each other of our arguments, and the functions served by various discourses. Discourse analysts do not aim to find ‘the truth’ about how people use language. They are more interested in the processes whereby people construct meanings socially and individually. Most discourse analysts are interested in subjectivity – people's own sense-making – and often include an analysis of the researcher's own subjective understandings as part of the analysis of data, thus using a mixture of insider and outsider viewpoints.

Discourse analysis is an example of a *hermeneutic* approach. Hermeneutic approaches focus on meaning-making; that is, the work of interpretation. People are treated as meaning-producers, with the task of the psychologist being to interpret meanings. Hermeneutic approaches, therefore, tend to use qualitative methods (rather than measuring variables, taking group averages and drawing conclusions with the help of statistics as in experimental and other quantitative methods). The data they produce tend to relate to particular individuals in specific contexts, rather than generalising to a population as a whole.

4-4e Different paradigms and different methods

These different methods alert us to the fact that psychology is not just one enterprise, but a series of interlocking enterprises in which psychologists have different views about the best ways to try to understand or explain people and their behaviour and experience. These are arguments about *epistemology*; that is, what questions to ask, what sort of evidence to look for, what sort of criteria to use to evaluate explanations, and what sort of methods to use.

All knowledge and all efforts to gain knowledge operate in a context, a set of connected and compatible assumptions about what exists and the way to gain knowledge of it. And we have already seen that research is done within a paradigm, which is a philosophical framework made up of assumptions about the subject matter and the ways in which it should be studied, including the methods and the kinds of data that are considered to be legitimate. The doing of

psychology within a given paradigm will, in this book, be referred to as *a. psychological perspective*. The co-existence of different perspectives means that there are debates between psychologists operating in different paradigms, as Peter Barnes explains:

“By now you will have gathered that there is no one approach to the study of psychology – each approach has its advocates and each has attracted its critics. At any one time some approaches are in the ascendant while others are in the doldrums. Different views exist on what subjects are worthy of investigation – and even on whether it is possible to investigate them – and these, too, have fashions.” (Barnes, 1985, p.28)

