

SHORTER REPORT

CORPORATE CRIME RESEARCH: WHY TWO INTERVIEWERS ARE NEEDED

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Bechhofer *et al.* (1984) in their recent research note urged sociologists to consider using two interviewers rather than one if they are serious about the validity of their data. I have been led to the same conclusion through a more traumatic confrontation with the limitations of the single interviewer approach in research on corporate crime.

A major source of data for my *Corporate Crime in the Pharmaceutical Industry* was interviews with 131 senior drug company executives in five countries. Publication of this book was delayed for two years beyond the normal production period as a result of disputes with the publisher's solicitors over questions of libel. The latter wanted to be satisfied that I could sustain some 300 empirical claims in a court of law. Review by solicitors is the most important validation of qualitative corporate crime research. Unfortunately, it is also a source of suppression of valid data. I had to yield to the caution of the solicitors on a number of questions where I had reason to suspect that a quote from an anonymous informant might be refuted by that person coming forward to say that he was the person and then proceeding to say (untruthfully) that I had misrepresented his words. Many informants said to me 'I would deny ever telling you this, but . . .'. If these people testified untruthfully on behalf of their company in a libel action, I would be in trouble. It would be the word of he who uttered the remarks against the recorder of the utterances.

The loss of so much data to my unwillingness to risk bankruptcy against such an eventuality was a major reason for deciding in future corporate crime research to work with a co-interviewer. There would then be two witnesses to any statement which might later be renounced in a libel suit. Though I did not tape interviews for *Corporate Crime in the Pharmaceutical Industry*, there is reason to believe that some interviews were secretly taped by the respondents. Knowing the informational advantage that this might give a corporate litigant also made me overly cautious in deciding what would be written up in the book. A second interviewer evens up this imbalance a little.

No pharmaceutical company has chosen to take libel action. However, the industry has made some effort to impugn my professional ethics by writing to my employer at the time (the Australian Institute of Criminology) with some false claims concerning misrepresentation of myself and my research in securing interviews. Luckily, I was able to prove to my employer that these particular allegations were untrue. However, it was clear that a co-interviewer was the best insurance against other allegations of this type which were not so easily rebutted. One defender of the industry has carried on this line of attack against the ethics of my research methods in reviews entitled 'Dubious Methods' (Dixon, 1984).

With my next interview research on corporate crime, almost 90 per cent of the interviews were conducted with my co-author, Brent Fisse. Ironically, this research, which did not begin until the manuscript for *Corporate Crime in the Pharmaceutical Industry* was

completed, was published before the latter (Fisse and Braithwaite, 1983). While there were no libel-induced delays with this book, two case studies were the subject of corporate threats of defamation action and there was a written complaint to my ultimate boss, the Australian Attorney-General, by one very large company.

For these reasons of self-protection and unnecessary data loss, I would strongly suggest that sociologists doing qualitative corporate crime research, or any other work which threatens the repute of powerful corporate interests, should always proceed with more than one interviewer. But what were the other advantages of multiple interviewers that became clear from the second project in comparison with the first?

In this regard, my conclusions about the superiority of multiple interviewers support those of Bechhofer *et al.* (1984) and revealed several more:

1. In the second project, data collection was more in the nature of informal conversations within a group of three or more people rather than a formal interview. The more relaxed style fostered rapport.

2. It was easier to keep up the flow of discussion, particularly at the point of embarrassing or sensitive disclosures.

3. Sometimes respondents could be put at ease by one interviewer saying to the other that he had put a certain question unfairly. Not that Brent Fisse and I had any serious disagreements during the interviews, but sometimes minor differences between us seemed to put respondents at ease in the feeling that they were participating in a normal dialogue rather than a conspiracy to extract information from them. On a few occasions we dabbled at a subtle form of 'hard-soft' interrogation strategy, but in most circumstances we felt it best for both of us to be 'soft'. The risks of the shutters being put up in response to even one of us being aggressive were too great.

4. Note taking is much improved with two interviewers. We alternated between one taking primary responsibility for sustaining dialogue while the other worked harder at taking notes.

5. When a respondent revealed sensitive information, one researcher could get this down verbatim while the other put his note pad away and worked busily at maintaining eye contact, nodding supportively, keeping the information flowing.

6. In an unstructured interview, two interviewers are better than one at ensuring that all the required topics are covered in the interview.

7. Contention between two interviewers was an important source of validation. After each interview, as Brent Fisse and I dictated from our notes the important points and quotes into a tape recorder, one of us would frequently challenge interpretations or misunderstandings of the other. These disagreements often forced us to go back to seek clarification from the informant.

8. To the corporate crime interviewer, knowledge, or the appearance of knowledge, is power. In my first study, I quickly learnt this from interviewing executives about bribery. A direct question about whether 'many of your competitors in the pharmaceutical industry' engaged in bribery did not work. The discussion was terminated by the usual public relations blurb about the industry being highly reputable, isolated instances in the past having been cleaned up today, and the like. I changed to a 'no babe in the woods' strategy: 'I know that most of the major pharmaceutical companies, including your own, have disclosed to the SEC (Securities and Exchange Commission) the making of corrupt payments in many parts of the world. I've spoken to people at the SEC who interview companies on such matters and they tell me that the practices are still widespread. Why do

large companies feel that they have to do this sort of thing?' In other words, 'I'm no babe in the woods. I know you do it, but why?' The approach almost never failed to elicit a lengthy and revealing discussion. As I wrote in the final paragraph of that book:

The most crucial lesson from this research has been the importance of knowing how the industry works. If one is well informed about the industry, and about the forms that law-breaking takes within it, one's demeanour can be that of a person who is 'no babe in the woods'. Unless knowledge and sophistication concerning the subject matter is established early in the interview, the respondent will regard the interview as a public relations exercise . . . On the other hand, executives do not enjoy the disrespect that comes from being regarded as an unthinking mouth-piece of industry dogma by someone who knows the industry. They, like everyone else, are keen to impress even strangers with their uniquely sophisticated understanding of how the industry really works (Braithwaite, 1984:388).

If I was right, and success is a function of interviewer knowledge and sophistication in this kind of research, then the combined knowledge of two people is better than that of one.

9. For obvious reasons, the most useful interviews on a sensitive subject occur with a couple of bottles of wine over lunch. As Bechhofer et al. (1984: 99) point out, the impracticability of systematic notetaking during these encounters means that the presence of a collaborator is invaluable in stimulating the memory to flesh out these interviews.

On the debit side, one cannot be sure whether there is heightened guardedness of respondents when confronted with two rather than one witness to any indiscretion.

My only mild criticism of Bechhofer et al., is that they seem to assume it is best for the interviewers to be 'two sociologists' who enjoy 'constant interaction between fieldwork and theory development'. Shared misconceptions and shared selectivity of perception are problems which may be less likely to occur to the extent that the interviewers bring different disciplinary socialization and, indeed, different values and cultural backgrounds to the research. The following contention of Miles has less force when the fieldworkers concerned have a predisposition to become committed to the same sorts of hypothesis:

(M)uch analysis was going on in the mind of the fieldworkers. Each one developed a fairly rich set of working hypotheses about what was going on in his or her site, along with a fairly retrievable store of specific anecdotes and incidents supporting the hypotheses. But without interaction with colleagues, the hypotheses went unchallenged and usually untested, and the anecdotes remembered were only those in support of the hypotheses (Miles, 1979: 594-5).

References

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