International Journal of Public Opinion Research Vol. 4 No. 3 0954–2892/92 $3.00

RESEARCH NOTES

ON THIRD PERSONS IN THE INTERVIEW SITUATION AND THEIR IMPACT ON RESPONSES

Karl-Heinz Reuband

INTRODUCTION

According to usual interview rules, other persons should not be present during face-to-face interviews. And survey analysis usually assumes these requirements have been fulfilled. However, in the few surveys in which data on the presence of third persons have been recorded, interviews with other people present have reached noteworthy proportions. A review for Germany (Reuband, 1984) has documented that these proportions vary, depending on the kind of population, between less than one fifth and two thirds of all interviews—(with an average of 37 percent in nationally representative surveys of the adult population). Findings from other western countries reveal somewhat similar variations. Some of the more important cross-national studies, based on national household surveys and the same topics of inquiry, have shown rather similar figures across the countries (Taietz, 1962, p. 103; Blair, 1980, p. 138; Reuband, 1984, p. 129).

Whether third persons are present, is a matter of some concern. Already in early family research it was shown that interview answers concerning marital happiness differ depending on the location of the spouse *vis-à-vis* the respondent within the room: The lesser the distance, the more marital happiness is proclaimed (Scheuch, 1973, p. 166). It seems as if the respondent is trying to avoid conflict and sanctions by giving replies that will suit the partner. Evidence has meanwhile amassed suggesting that others exert strong effects usually in questions which—like happiness with spouse—bear a direct relationship to the kind of person present. Only minimal effects exist when topics with no such direct relationships are referred to. But even for some of these, effects of some magnitude have occasionally been described, though often on the basis of sub-groups only (cf. Pfeil and Friedrichs, 1965; Podmore *et al.*, 1975; Glagow, 1982; Turner and Martin, 1984, p. 273; Reuband, 1984, 1987; Hagstotz, 1985; Mohr, 1986, p. 60).

METHODOLOGY

In view of the possible effects on responses of other people, questions arise how this comes to be and what the dynamics of the intervention is. Data relevant to these questions have not been collected in the past. At most information on presence, or on interventions only, was recorded, without further differentiation on type of person, reason for intervention, etc. Given this dearth of data we included in West German

national face-to-face surveys first in 1982 (see also Reuband, 1987) and then again in 1987 a set of questions concerning the presence of others in the household and the dynamics of the interview situation. The surveys, each based on a random sample, cover the adult population from 18 years onwards.

In the following we shall use primarily the more elaborate data from the 1987 study. It is based on six cross-sectional surveys on attitudes towards the census and related political questions. Furthermore, we make partial use of the fact that one of these surveys was part of a three-wave panel study in which the questions on the presence of persons was asked repeatedly. The number of respondents in the six cross-sectional surveys amounts to 7,559 people cumulatively; in the three-wave panel study it comes to 1,192 people.[1]

PRESENCE OF OTHERS AND OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE

In 28 percent of all interviews in the cumulative sample other people were present—mostly the spouse, in a few cases the children and other family members, or people from outside the family. At first glance then, the interviewers seem to have been quite successful in following the interview rules, according to which other people should be excluded if possible. The relative 'success' even holds when we restrict our sample to married respondents or those living with a partner: the proportion increases slightly to 37 percent. Compared with figures from other surveys (cf. Reuband, 1984; Mohr, 1986), our rate is relatively low, even below average.

But when we take the *opportunity structure* into consideration and restrict ourselves to those respondents with a spouse, partner or others present at home at the time of the interview, the picture changes dramatically: the minority situation becomes a majority situation, i.e., 60 percent of all interviews are now characterized by others' presence (Table 1). The usually low figures of others' presence is evidently more often due to pure chance than to deliberate action on the part of the interviewer.

If we break the data down according to the type of people at home, and calculate the presence rate on this basis, we find that it is greatest for spouse (66 percent) and other people (67 percent). For children and other family members the rate is somewhat lower. Spouses may have some interest in the interview or even of controlling the situation. In situations of people from outside the family, it might simply be a matter of hospitality to not send them into other rooms. Children, on the other hand, might be more interested in playing in their own room rather than listening to political and other far remote questions.

In none of the data is there evidence that interviewers are responsible for keeping others out: (1) when asked who is responsible for the presence of the other person during the interview—the respondent, the other person, or both—60 percent of all cases remain unclassified.[2] If the interviewer had acted according to the rules and asked the person to

[1] All surveys were done by GFM-GETAS as part of a project on the census at the Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung, University of Cologne, Germany. The response rates of the surveys are around 70 percent. The data are archived in the Zentralarchiv and are available for secondary analysis.

TABLE 1 **Presence of other people during the interview without and with opportunity structure controlled**

	Respondents in general percent	*Respondents with respective others at home at time of interview*
Presence of other persons during interview	28	60
In detail: Presence of:		
—Spouse	17	66
—Children	7	49
—Other family members	4	49
—Others	2	67

Note. Multiple answers possible for kinds of people present.

leave the room, he should also have described himself as the main actor responsible for the situation. (2) Where information is given on the cause of leaving, it is mainly due to the other person (87 percent). The respondent is rarely named (12 percent) and hardly ever the interviewer (2 percent). The other person might leave simply out of respect for the private interview situation or because of other things to do. The interview situation might not be as great an attraction (as it once used to be) as to make the other person remain during the interview. The interviewer's low influence could, on the other hand, also reflect a general reluctance or indifference on his behalf to intervene in the specific situation.

Partly due to the opportunity structure of the household, the time of the interview and the undecisiveness of the interviewer, the presence of others does not turn out to be a stable characteristic: in the three-wave panel study spanning half a year there is a stability across all waves of 55 percent. In the other 45 percent of the cases, the situation differs in at least one wave.

PRESENCE OF OTHERS AND FORMS OF INTERVENTION

Leaving the interviewer's behavior aside, what are the basic processes that lead to other people's presence and the subsequent dynamics of their intervention? In contrast to common assumptions in the literature, the respondent rather than the third person plays

[2] Earlier surveys using the same kind of questions developed by us and done by another survey institute (Mohr, 1986; Reuband, 1987) come to somewhat smaller rates. But there, too, the rate is noteworthily large. This even holds, if we restrict ourselves to spouses present (and exclude minors who potentially distort the picture) for comparison. To what extent the difference between the surveys is due to differing interviewing staffs is not known.

an important part. In 40 percent of the situations it is the respondent himself who asks the other person to stay. In 31 percent it is both the respondent *and* the other person and in only 29 percent it is the other person. Earlier surveys of ours, and related surveys using our indicator, point in the same direction: a majority of the third party situations is caused by the respondent or jointly with the other person.[3]

This action of the respondent suggests that the observed effects of third persons in cross-sectional surveys need not always reflect a yielding to external pressure as most often interpreted. They might sometimes also reflect the respondent's internal desire to obtain emotional and social support from others. And they might also indicate a selection effect in which people with certain attitudes are likely to ask others to remain present. People with high marital happiness e.g., might want to share the interview experience with their spouse.

Where others are present, they keep to themselves. Direct interventions into the interview are rare—occurring in only 33 percent of all situations with others present. And where they occur they are sporadic rather than frequent (sporadic 30 percent, frequent 4 percent). Whether this is due to the participants themselves or to the interviewer who, accepting the interview situation, tries to keep the others silent, is not known. Whatever the reason, the finding is clear: other people, if they have any impact at all, might act primarily as a *catalyst*, they might change the frame of reference in the response process or even constitute targets at which responses are directed (cf. Reuband, 1984).

In the few cases with direct intervention, the initiative usually rests in the other person. This holds regardless of who was originally responsible for the situation (Table 2). Compared with the beginning of the situation, the pattern of intervention signifies a shift towards the other person. It could mean that some of the respondents, somewhat insecure at the beginning, gradually build up trust in the interviewer, and confidence in themselves at the same time, as the interest of the other person in the interview increases. A situation is being established which has its own dynamics, unforeseen at the beginning. Perhaps this is partially due to the topic of the interview: as long as the respondents feel somewhat knowledgeable about the topic of the questions, they might use the other person only for *potential* assistance, as some kind of last resort. With more abstract topics or those which need extensive memory searches, the situation might be different.[4]

CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis of German data has shown that serious attempts to safeguard the privacy of the interview situation are often not made by the interviewer. The rate for presence of

[3] The only difference that exists is that sometimes the other person is more frequently important in this decision than the respondent—mostly due to a somewhat stronger tendency among women, who tend to lean on others.

[4] It is only among the older and the less educated where some overproportional and noticeable tendencies can be observed among the respondents who asked for others' presence also to lean on them for advice (up to 40 percent), reflecting greater insecurity and unfamiliarity with the interview situation. The other persons seem to represent some kind of supportive environment under these circumstances which eases their involvement in the pre-given task.

TABLE 2 **Direct intervention in the interview according to reason for presence of the other person**

	Presence due to				
	Respondent	*Respondent and other*	*Other*	*Unknown*	*Total*
	percent				
Intervention by the other person	37	49	42	27	33
In detail: Intervention by:					
—Request of respondent	11	6	5	3	4
—Both equally	7	14	6	5	6
—Spontaneous reply of the other	20	29	32	19	22
—No answer	—	—	—	*	*
(n=)	(337)	(247)	(268)	(1257)	(2120)

* <0.5 percent.

third persons could therefore be further reduced if interviewers were pressing more rather than accepting the given situation. When third persons are present, however, it is usually not due to them alone. Rather, it is the respondent who takes an active part. This might hamper somewhat the ability of the interviewer to keep others out.

The fact that other people's presence is partly due to the respondent in turn means that the effects evolving out of the other's presence in cross-sectional surveys, cannot always be interpreted as a matter of pure conformity. The effects might equally reflect a selection or an interaction effect arising out of selection *and* conformity processes. One possibility to separate the three effects lies in using a panel design: for nearly half the respondents, as we have seen, the interview might take place under different circumstances in a panel study. If there is a selection process, the response should be identical across the different interview situations. If the effect reflects a conformity process it should vary from situation to situation. And if there is an interaction effect one would expect it to differ depending on who is responsible for the other person's presence. Studies of this sort require three preconditions: the effect in the cross-sectional survey must be strong enough to allow for such an analysis. The indicator should be identical in all panel waves. And the number of respondents should be large enough to allow a differentiation, if possible, according to subgroups (like sex).[5]

[5] In the present panel study the number of cases was unfortunately too small to allow for such a differentiation. We therefore abstain here from such an analysis.

REFERENCES

Blair, E. (1980): 'Interviewing in the presence of others', In: Bradburn, N. M. and Sudman, S., *Improving interview method and questionnaire design*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass, pp. 134–46.

Glagow, H. (1982): 'Anwesenheit Dritter beim Interview', *Interview und Analyse*, 9, 260–2.

Hagstotz, W. (1985): 'Wertwandel. Was ist die Theorie vom Wandel wirklich wert?', *Die politische Meinung*, 30, 19–29.

Mohr, H. M. (1986): 'Dritte beim Interview. Ergebnisse zu Indikatoren aus dem Bereich Ehe und Partnerschaft mit Daten des "Wohlfahrtssurvey 1984"', *ZA Information*, 19, 52–71.

Pfeil, E. and Friedrichs, J. (1965): 'Überlegungen zum Problem rollenbedingter Interviewantworten', *Zeitschrift für Markt- und Meinungsforschung*, 8, 1877–84.

Podmore, D., Chaney, D. and Golder, P. (1975): 'Third parties in the interview situation: evidence from Hong Kong', *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 95, 227–31.

Reuband, K.-H. (1984): 'Dritte Personen beim Interview—Zuhörer, Adressaten oder Katalysatoren der Kommunikation?' In: Meulemann, H. and Reuband, K. H. (eds.), *Soziale Realität im Interview*, Frankfurt, Campus, pp. 117–56.

Reuband, K.-H. (1987): 'Unerwünschte Dritte im Interview. Erscheinungsformen und Folgen', *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 16, 303–8.

Scheuch, E. K. (1973): 'Das Interview in der Sozialforschung'. In: König, R. (ed.), *Handbuch der empirischen Sozialforschung*, Vol. 2: Grundlegende Methoden und Techniken der empirischen Sozialforschung, Erster Teil, 3rd Edn. (first 1967), Stuttgart, Enke, pp. 66–190.

Taietz, P. (1962): 'Conflicting group norms and the 'third' person in the interview', *American Journal of Sociology*, 68, 97–104.

Turner, C. F. and Martin, E. (eds.) (1984): Surveying subjective phenomena, Vol. 1, New York: Russel Sage Foundation.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

Karl-Heinz Reuband has a Ph.D. in sociology. He is research associate at the Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung and Privat-Dozent of sociology at the University of Cologne. He is presently visiting professor of sociology at the University of Trier. His research domains are survey methodology, social and cultural change, and social problems.