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Dr Sandy Ochojna is an independent survey research advisor. Between 1986 and 2008 he was the Manchester-based director of several well-known international market research companies; for the ten years prior to that he was Passenger Manager at Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive in Glasgow. From time to time he feels compelled to set down his thoughts on topical survey issues.

Evidence-based evaluation is getting everywhere, even into NGO development work amongst the poorest people on the planet: many attempts to date have been poorly thought out or undertaken half-heartedly. As a member of a development organisation – MICAIA – based in Mozambique (see our website www.micaia.org) I was asked to design a survey programme, in the first instance to help assess the impact of a particularly large and ambitious project based on the harvesting and selling of honey, and in the longer term to be used as a standard measure in all our projects. Only as I worked through the stages did I begin to realise just how much of my original design was based on assumptions about the respondents, implicit and explicit, which bore little or no relation to reality. This is a *reductio ad absurdum* warning to all of us: particularly in these days of e-surveys and internet polls and the like – everything can be done so quickly that now and again we should stop and consider who it is we are trying to talk to and what they might really think about the subject which, for that moment at least, is at the top of our minds.

In a nutshell, Henry Morton Stanley got it right at Ujiji on the shores of Lake Tanganyika in 1871.....because he was there.

The four horsemen of the apocalypse

It's quite amazing just how many assumptions we tend to make when setting up a survey, particularly when settling on the key design parameters of survey universe (who we ask), sample size (how many we ask), questionnaire (what we ask), and fieldwork method (how we ask).

When there is a **famine** of facts, just the bare minimum of demographic information and census data any discussion of sample size and especially, composition, becomes quite simply an academic nicety. Setting quotas becomes fairly meaningless. But we had to engage with a large enough sample of residents in the villages under review (those involved in the honey project and some which were not and were selected as a control sample) to be able to be confident that we could measure any real changes over time. So we set out to try and speak with the survey universe, but should that be at the household or the individual level? Simple logistics surrounding fieldwork time and resourcing dictated that the unit of sampling be the household rather than the individual, hence we focused on heads-of-household, and they are not always male with many household headed by widows or wives whose husbands work elsewhere.

The **pestilence** of illiteracy and innumeracy plagues Mozambique like most of southern Africa: very few villagers can read or write or recognise more than a few numbers. This makes conventional quantitative survey methods totally useless, particularly when there are very few, if any, trained and experienced interviewers in the country. Group discussions might give us flavour, and engagement, but not statistical rigour.

Designing the questionnaire was a **war** of different worlds. We were seeking to assess how becoming involved in honey production, or not, affects lifestyles and expectations. In my early questionnaire drafts I had questions on aspirations about the ownership of things: I had questions on household income, past and expected. My colleagues based in Mozambique quietly threw it away: expectations were just a bit too tricky to handle when everything depends on next year's harvest, and no-one has control over that. And while my list of household possessions and desires included such things as running water, sanitation and electricity, such community based infrastructure is way beyond the reach of those in rural areas. My list was narrowed down to include such fairly mundane, but household based articles such as a bicycle, a corrugated iron roof, a cell phone, a CD player and a solar panel.

And they had a go at my answer code frames as well. Concepts such as fractions mean nothing, hence trying to gauge what proportion of a household's income comes from say selling crops, or family members sending money home from the towns etc. had to be addressed in a simpler way. And when many can't count in the formal sense, then asking about family composition and ownership of things cannot seek accuracy.

To all intents and purposes our solution to the problems implied the **death** of the conventional rules of surveys. But, as I have said before, (see my earlier Case Note on the ideal questionnaire) a survey should set itself up as best it can to foster a conversation between or amongst the interviewer and respondents. And this is what we set out to do, by merging qualitative and quantitative methods.

Close encounters of the third kind

We are in the field, quite literally. Picture the archetypal African broad topped acacia tree: under its shade sit the heads of the households in the village, all looking towards our interviewer/moderator. We have the permission of the village council or headman, so all is well.

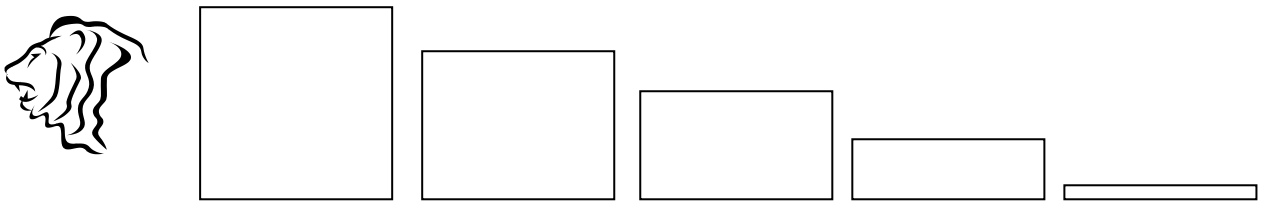
The interviewer has his answer sheets and instruction boards, and each participant has their own answer sheet which shows nothing but symbols and upon which they will make their marks.

To get things started in a fairly conventional way the interviewer opens up the session by asking everyone what is best about living in the village, and what they would like to see improved. Classic open-enders indeed, but these people cannot write, so the interviewer moderates a short discussion, gets everyone involved, then notes down on his sheet the key issues to emerge. This approach is used to gather local information on satisfaction with living in the area, distances to schools, clean water supplies etc , and chances of themselves, and then their children still living there in the next five or so years. It has been adapted already for another project where local land use is being mapped out by the participants.

Then it becomes personal. The interviewer points to a symbol (and in some cases this can even be numerals with the moderator keeping everyone on-side) on one of his flip charts: this can be a tree or an animal, and the participants find that picture/symbol on their answer sheet: alongside this are answer symbols relating to that question and

which are on the interviewer's other flip chart. The interviewer reads out the question, shows what each answer symbol means, reads out the question again and then the respondents make their mark on their answer sheets over the symbol that best matches their situation. They use charcoal because it is readily available locally and does not assume that villagers are familiar with using a pencil or a pen.

For example, question  could be: "How much of your total household income is spent on feeding the family?" The respondents' answer sheet looks like this.



And they have been told by the interviewer using the flip chart that these symbols in turn mean, 'all of it', 'most of it', half of it' etc. They put their mark on the appropriate shape. Numerals are depicted by matchstick people. And the more we can use the same set of symbols the easier it becomes hence every effort was made to fit questions around as few answer frames as possible.

A complete village dataset then comprises the interviewer/moderator's group discussion key points plus the collected-in respondent-completed forms. The key village points are then coded into a 'open-ender' code frame, and now it becomes a standard data entry issue.

The survey was achieved by compromising the wish to collect individual and household specific data on lifestyle and the like by collecting such information on a group discussion basis, and by asking only those questions at the respondent level which could be understood unambiguously and readily, and answered meaningfully and quickly using simple answer code frames. OK, we cannot assign qualitative comments to individuals, but we do at least get a grasp of the overall picture.

Out of Africa

While very few of us will get the chance to design surveys for the villagers of Africa, this experience has taught me several lessons about perhaps just how gung-ho we can be in our approach to designing surveys at home. Yes, we can do pilots, and cognitive testing of questionnaires, and all the rest of it, but I have been left with the nagging worry that the mindset of the researcher, and/or the client, can be just a wee bit too pervasive at times.

And here are some simple lessons that I have taken out off Moz.

- when you are designing a survey, go and visit the area or areas where the survey is to take place. Just look at what is there, and look at the facilities, and look at the people. If you can't do that then talk to people who have. That way you will get Dr Livingstone's name right first time. That way you might avoid the Margaret Thatcher moment of asking state school children why their mummy doesn't put out the silver spoons when having boiled eggs for breakfast: most would never have seen a silver spoon, many would not be that sure of what a boiled egg is, and some might even have struggled with the concept of breakfast.

- if you cannot draw a representative sample, then take what you can get, but collect as much demographic information as you can, so that you can set your results in context.

- design the questionnaire with the respondent in mind, especially with respect to their aspirations and experience. Remember, for closed questions the answer frame can be as influential as the question itself. And the fewer sets of answer frames you present, the easier it is for the respondent to consider his reply.

- in this business there is no such thing as 'no can do'.

- and, perhaps most important of all, be prepared to accept that there are many instances where 'the best is the enemy of the good'.

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