Interviewer Effects on Survey Response in an Andean Estate

J. OSCAR ALERS*
Boston College, Boston, U.S.A.

AFTER several decades of continuing experience with structured interview surveys in the advanced industrial nations in which they originated, a great deal of knowledge has been accumulated on this technique, to the point that it has been codified in a number of standard texts.1 With the diffusion of the formal survey beyond its point of origin, however, it has become apparent that much less is known about the possibilities and limitations of this technique for the underdeveloped areas of the world.

Beginning in July of 1963, the author spent some six months in the depressed highland Peruvian estate of Vicos, collecting the data necessary for a study of social and attitudinal factors in the economic development of this community of 2,100 Quechua-speaking Indians.2 The principal instrument employed for this purpose was a structured interview schedule, which was intended to be applied to all Vicosino heads of household who had been enumerated in a census of the community completed during January and February of the same year.

The purpose of the present study is to assess the effect of interviewer types on the reliability of the responses obtained in Vicos by means of the 1963 survey.

* The author wishes to express his thanks to Rose K. Goldsen and Robert McGinnis for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.


The strategy followed in making this evaluation consists of studying the responses of the same Vicosino subjects to the same questions over three successive waves of interviews at three separate points in time. Reliability in this sense is assessed in terms of the relative proportion of responses that remain consistent in their values upon remeasurement.

**Design**

A first draft of the interview schedule in English was developed in the United States during the Spring of 1963. Later, after consulting with several mestizos and Indians in Vicos, a revised final draft was prepared and translated into Spanish by the author. The Spanish version was in turn translated into local Quechua, a task that was accomplished in three stages by two Vicosinos and three mestizos, one of whom was the anthropologist of the Cornell Peru Project stationed in Vicos.

For the task of administering the schedule, eleven persons were selected as interviewers, all resident in Vicos over a period of years. They were chosen from a somewhat larger potential supply of interviewers according to the criteria of competence, including the ability to speak local Quechua, and of enjoying the confidence and respect of the Vicosinos. Of the eleven interviewers, four were native Vicosinos and seven were mestizos. Of the latter, six were school-teachers in Vicos and one was a former Peruvian government employee who had taken up residence in the community. Only two of the interviewers, however, were able to lend their services to the study on a full-time basis throughout the interviewing period.

The sampling design for the three waves of interviews with male subjects in the survey was as follows: for the first interview wave, the pretest, 20 subjects were chosen at random from the population of male heads of household in Vicos, with the probability of selection proportional to the number of subjects in each of the ten administrative zones into which the community is divided. Pretest interviews were carried out during October and the first week of November and pointed up the need for a number of revisions in the schedule. It was found, first of all, that the schedule was much too long, with a mean length of 170 minutes, or almost three hours, for the twenty interviews. Although part of this was due to the fact that the interviewers were not yet completely familiar with the schedule, a decision was made to omit about 25 per cent of the questions for the next wave of interviews. The pretest also revealed that both the interviewers and the subjects had some difficulty in understanding the Quechua translation and this was revised accordingly. It should be noted that, aside from the omission of entire items, the questions that were asked of the subjects were identical in all three interview waves.

The second, or test, set of interviews was conducted with 326, or 98 per cent, of the 334 male heads of household living in the community at the time of the survey and constitutes the principal source of data for the survey as a whole. These interviews were completed during the month of December, 1963.