

4 Questionnaires, Interviews, Documentary and Media Sources

“Data! data! data!” he cried impatiently. “I can’t make bricks without clay.”

Sherlock Holmes, in The Copper Beeches

4.1 Why and how do you use questionnaires?

You use questionnaires as the “measuring instrument” to collect and record the data. If you are collecting information about perpetrators, you may want to know their names, their organizations, whether they worked alone or with others, what language(s) they spoke, etc. The questions that you develop to get these data comprise the questionnaire.

The process of making a list of questions in advance helps you determine how you will look for the answers and how they will be recorded in your interview or transcription from documents and to some extent the order in which they will be answered.

When used for an interview, the list of questions and space for answers is usually called a **questionnaire** or a **form**. As discussed in several places, you can use the same or a modified version of the questionnaire for other purposes such as:

- Abstracting data from documents or media reports
- Guidance for a review at the end of a narrative interview
- Abstracting information from narrative interview reports
- Recording information supplied by a witness or other source

Later we discuss the interview process in some detail. As you will see, in some cases you will ask the questions exactly as they are written on the questionnaire and enter the responses directly, and in other cases you will conduct a narrative discussion and then enter the responses in a questionnaire after reviewing the narrative.

4.2 How do you decide which questions to ask?

If you have followed our guidance in Chapter 3, you will have determined what you want to measure or count. Do that task well, and it is an easy matter to write the questions.

Suppose that you are concerned with the beating of persons held in detention after they tried to vote for the opposition party in an election. In discussion, it is agreed that you want to determine the intensity of the beatings.

For example, if the worst that happened was slapping once or twice, this is a mild level of abuse (but it should not be ignored). On the other hand, if victims were hit with rifle butts repeatedly, this is a serious violation. Blows with different weapons have different effects on different parts of the body. The duration of the beatings of the various types is important as well.

Thus, the concept of “intensity of beating” comes down to knowing the method (hitting, slapping, kicking, and punching), the weapon (hand, rifle, handgun, stick), and the duration (time). Note that the list of methods and weapons is based on your prior knowledge of the methods and weapons used by the state forces. This leads us to the following set of questions:

Figure 4.1 Questions about beating intensity

Question No.	Question	Answers
1.1	Were you slapped ?	Yes/No/Can't recall
1.2	With what?	Hand Other (specify)
1.3	For how long during your detention?	Number of hours Can't recall
2.1	Were you hit ?	Yes/No/Can't recall
2.2	With what?	Hand Rifle Handgun Stick Other (specify)
2.3	For how long during your detention?	Number of hours Can't recall
3.1	Were you punched ?	Yes/No/Can't recall
3.2	With what?	Hand Rifle Handgun Stick Other (specify)
3.3	For how long during your detention?	Number of hours Can't recall
4.1	Were you kicked ?	Yes/No/Can't recall
4.2	For how long during your detention?	Number of hours Can't recall
4.3	What did the perpetrators say to you to justify your treatment?	Narrative

The above questionnaire is for a victim interview, subject to the assumption that none of the victims were beaten so much as to cause them to die or to be unable to respond. In a real situation, not all deponents are victims, as some of the victims may have died, or been unable or unwilling to talk with you. In those cases, you would be dependent on witnesses, survivors, relatives, intervening parties, and possibly even perpetrators.

All deponents need not be victims. In fact, a deponent may have several roles, for example one deponent might be both a witness and other source of data and a victim. To clarify these distinctions, we give the following definitions, paraphrased from one of the HURIDOCs publications (as discussed in Chapter 3):

A **role** is a characteristic of a person, which is dependent on a certain context, and thus can change from one setting to another. For instance, a certain person may be a victim in one event and an intervening party in another.

The **victim** is the person (individual or group) who is the object of an [human rights violation] act.

The **perpetrator** is the person (individual or group) who commits an act that constitutes a [human rights] violation. The means used could be concrete weapons such as guns, or more abstract processes such as lawmaking.

[A] **source** is the person (individual or group) who provides information on the [human rights event] and/or its elements [such as individual violations].

[An] **intervening party** is the person (individual or group) who intervenes in an event, such as to aid a victim or to seek to stop ongoing violation.¹

You will find the concept of the *role* and these definitions valuable in the frequent situations where the same person may play different roles at different times. For example, a victim may, as a consequence of being victimized and captured, become a member of the perpetrator group, and subsequently become a source.

4.3 Why number the questions?

The questions in Figure 4.1 are numbered, using a decimal notation. As we have said in Chapter 2, you must *always* number questions (as well as the pages!). You need numbers on the questions so that you can refer to them without ambiguity. We do *not* imply that the questions will be asked in the order of the numbering. You number your questions so that you will have an unambiguous reference to any question.

Use a decimal notation so that if you add a question, you can easily number it in sequence. For example, if you decide that the location of the blows is relevant, you can insert a series of questions numbered 1.4, 2.4, and 3.3 asking about the location of the beating for each type. Decimal notation also gives us the option of adding question numbers between existing numbers, such as 1.41, 1.42, or 3.15.

4.4 What are the types of questions?

The questionnaire of Figure 4.1 contains two types of questions, **open-ended** and **closed-ended**.

In an *open-ended* question, the respondents reply in their own words.

- Question 4.3 is clearly *open-ended* since it calls for a narrative response and allows the respondent to provide an individual, textual response.
- Question 4.2 is *open-ended*. If the response is not “Can’t recall,” the respondent can answer with any positive numerical value.
- Question 1.2 is also *open-ended*; but that may not be clear on first reading. If a hand was not used, the deponent can reply to “Other (specify)” with an individual response.

In a *closed-ended* question, the respondents reply by choosing one of a set of predetermined responses.

Question 1.1 is *closed-ended*. The deponent can answer with only one of the three

responses, “Yes,” “No,” and “Can’t recall.”

Questions 1.3, 2.1, 2.3, 3.1, 3.3 and 4.1 are also *closed-ended*. They ask for a choice among predetermined responses.

Figure 4.2 shows the major advantages and disadvantages of the two types of questions.²

Figure 4.2 Advantages and disadvantages of closed-ended and open-ended questions

Type of question	Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>Open-ended</i>	<p>Does not restrict the respondent to preconceived list of responses.</p> <p>Allows respondent to make fine distinctions and qualifications.</p> <p>Reduces the likelihood of leading respondent to a response pattern.</p> <p>Can give information that could not be conceived of in advance.</p> <p>Allows collection of needed information during course of a project that might not have been foreseen when the questionnaire was designed.</p>	<p>May take time and effort to code to standard terms to enter into database, especially if non-numerical.</p> <p>Possibility of error or bias because of ambiguity or differences in meaning assigned to responses.</p> <p>Usually takes more time.</p> <p>Subject to bias due to interaction between interviewer and respondent.</p> <p>Talkative respondents can bias the responses towards their interpretations.</p>
<i>Closed-ended</i>	<p>Fast and easy to answer or to check off.</p> <p>Reduces confusion about use of words.</p> <p>Immediately transferable to database.</p> <p>May remind respondents of responses they may not have remembered.</p>	<p>May not offer respondent a choice that corresponds to their answer.</p> <p>Can lead deponent to a biased response.</p> <p>No response is available if none of the choices are descriptive of a respondent's desired response.</p>

We do not discuss the other types of questions that ask for amount of agreement or for the respondent to indicate the strength of feelings (“On a scale from one to five”)

4.5 Why don't you give ranges for numerical answers?

When asking questions such as 1.3, 2.3, 3.3, and 4.2 requiring a numerical answer some questionnaire designers will convert the open-ended response to a closed-ended response by offering responses that place the numerical value of the response into

predetermined classes such as:

- Less than 1 hour
- 1 to less than 3 hours
- 3 to less than 5 hours
- 5 hours or longer

This all-too-common practice causes problems for the deponent, creates bias, and makes it impossible to perform some analyses (such as calculating a mean, measuring the spread of the values, or finding maximum or minimum values).

When you ask a question this way, you are asking the deponent to perform a computation, to take the time they recall (albeit vaguely) and place it into a category. Many people, especially illiterate or unschooled persons, have trouble with expressing inequalities in this mathematically formal way.

This approach forces the deponent to use only the pre-determined numerical classes that can introduce serious biases. For example, we have seen questions of this type used in surveys in which almost 80% of the answers fall in the equivalent of the “5 hours or longer” category. In that case, you have no way to know if beatings extended to eight or to twenty hours. We have also seen situations in which the questionnaire designers created age groupings based on their pre-judgment of the ages of victims and ended up with 20% of their victims falling into the “over 50” category. This leaves them without any knowledge of the extent to which elderly people may have been targeted.³

There is no good reason to ask respondents to put their numerical answers into categories. *If you want a numerical answer, ask for the number. Don't make numerical categories in advance.* You can always create the categories later.

4.6 Why don't you use “Don't know” for those who cannot answer?

We use “Don't recall” for two reasons. First, it is literally correct. The duration of the beating is not something the victim doesn't *know*, it is something that for physical reasons (unconsciousness, lack of watches or clocks, isolation from views of the outside) and possibly emotional reasons, they cannot recall from their memory. They just know it happened.

Secondly, for some people in general, and in some cultures in particular, admitting a lack of knowledge can be perceived as an embarrassment, or a rebuff to the interviewer. Thus, they may be tempted to simply guess, leading to an unknown bias.

4.7 Demographic information about the deponent

Continuing in terms of your concern with beating victims during an election period, you will need some demographic information about the victim or other sources. The challenges in designing the questions are (1) to make sure to include all information that may be needed in the analysis, but at the same time 2) to ask no irrelevant questions.

4.8 Do we record the deponent's name?

There are many reasons for asking the deponent for their full name. You do not want to interview the same person twice or duplicate an incident because of data collected from documents. Also, you may want to look for victimization of people with common names, or you may want to be able to return to the deponent's data to check the data collected. Or, you may want to see if the deponent would be willing to give an open testimony.

On the other hand, the deponents have serious and valid concerns about giving their name. If their names were to fall into the hands of perpetrators because they gave it to you during an interview, they might well be subject to intimidation that threatens their lives or livelihoods.

We only say here that in human rights data collection it is always good practice to give the deponent anonymity on the physical answer sheet that carries information that could be perceived as accusatory of alleged perpetrators. One easy and effective way to do this is to identify deponents by a serial number and to maintain a separate sheet on which you list the names, addresses, and other identifying information and their serial numbers.

This separate sheet should be kept under lock and key, to be accessed only if needed. If you have access to computers, it is even better to *encrypt* the information relating names and serial numbers so that no unauthorized person can read it.⁴ No one should have access to either the locked area or the encryption keys without proper identification and anyone entering the locked safe or area should sign in. It is always best to *routinely* take these precautions.

4.9 What other demographic data do we need?

Continuing with our example, your group should conduct an intensive and wide-ranging discussion about just what kinds of information you wish to get in the analysis of the data we collect. For example, do you wish to determine if the following characteristics of the individuals lead to different treatment?

- Sex
- Age
- Occupation
- Ethnic origin
- Political party affiliation

The listing of demographic characteristics on which you will collect data should not be the longest possible grab bag of characteristics. It should represent a considered listing of those characteristics of which you will make use. Long questionnaires do not get fully answered; you want the shortest possible questionnaire consistent with your goals. Again and again, we see questionnaires that are many pages long, filled with answers that are never entered into the database, or if entered, never used in any analysis. The resources of human rights workers and NGOs are too limited to squander because care and thought were not given before devising the questionnaire.

Following our proposed listing of characteristics, the demographic section of our questionnaire would look like Figure 4.3, below.

Figure 4.3 Demographic section of questionnaire

Question No.	Question	Answers
0.1	Interviewer	Name
0.2	Victim Identification Number	five digit number assigned to questionnaire
5.1	Sex?	Male/Female
5.2	Age?	Number Refuses to answer
5.3	Occupation?	Peasant Landowner Merchant etc. as appropriate No answer
5.4	Ethnic origin?	Albanian Kosovar Serb Croat etc. as appropriate Refuses to answer Other (specify)
5.5	Political party affiliation?	Communist Social democrat, etc., as appropriate Refuses to answer Other (specify)

It is good practice to give a unique identification to every questionnaire. However, we do not in general want to have the questionnaire carry identification of the deponent. The five-digit number assigned to questionnaire as the “Victim Identification Number” of Question 0.2 can be used as the identification of the individual. Note that the individual’s name and address and any other identifying materials do not appear on the form. The same security issue applies to witnesses and other persons that might be subject to abuse if they were identified by your completed questionnaire forms.

The linkage between the Victim or other deponent Identification and the deponent’s name, address and other identifying information can be made using a separate form that is kept in a secure location away from the questionnaires and any possible theft by perpetrators or others. Ideally, you should keep this information in encrypted files located in another country.

Figure 4.4 Associated questionnaire for confidential information

Questionnaire No.	Victim	Information
6.1	Victim Identification Number	five digit number assigned to victim questionnaire
6.2	Interviewer	Name
6.3	Surname(s)	(Specify)
6.4	Given name(s)	(Specify)
6.5	Other names used	(Specify)
6.6	Name not known	Yes/No
6.7	Contact address	(Specify)

The rows 6.1 through 6.7 will be repeated for each Victim Identification Number.

4.10 What do you do if there are several persons or groups involved in the same situation?

Our discussion in this section applies both to the case where there are several persons (or groups) involved in the same setting and where there are people playing different roles.

To continue with the example above, if you have several deponents in a particular event, you will have to make a demographic section such as Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4 for each such person. When there are persons taking on multiple roles (victims, sources, perpetrators, etc.) involved as well as persons, you will need to have multiple sets of these forms.

While we have argued for not collecting irrelevant information, a summary of possible variables will help you in designing personal demographic sections. Accordingly, in Figure 4.5 we show a list of possible variables, drawn from the HURIDOCs publication discussed above, enhanced by information from projects with which we are familiar.⁵

Figure 4.5 Listing of possible personal variables

Victim Identification Number
Interviewer
Surname(s)
Given name(s)
Other names used
Address
Contact information (telephone, mail, etc.)
Date of Birth
Place of Birth
Confidentiality
Sex
Sexual orientation
Identification documents
Civil status
Age
Occupation (international categories)
Occupation (local categories)
Ethnic origin
Political party affiliation
Dependents
Educational attainment
Training
Health
Medical records
Physical description
Torture stigmata
Deceased
Decease date
Religion
Race
Citizenship
Passport number
Passport country of origin
Languages spoken
National origin
Reliability as source
Reliability as intervening party
Prisoner number
Imprisonment locations
Employer information
Contact information
Organizational memberships (political, military, religious, paramilitary, etc.)
Relationship to other persons
Official charges
Names of close relatives (father, mother, etc.)
Update date
Updated by

4.11 Will you always have a precise knowledge of your needs at the start of a project?

It is rarely possible to have a precise knowledge of goals, objectives and data requirements at the start of a project. However, to guide your work – *and to be ready to deal with changes* -- you must try to make explicit statements of your understanding of the goals, objectives and data requirements.

You can make a tentative questionnaire as a basis for discussion. By so doing, you will give others a chance to see how you interpret your data collection mission. Expect to have changes in your tentative plans and questionnaires as the work of your project proceeds and collects additional information.

Human rights information systems and data analysis projects are essentially research projects; you have to be willing and able to make changes in direction as new information is developed.

4.12 What are some additional guidelines for good questionnaire design?

Based on our experience and that of others, good questions *usually* meet the following additional conditions. They:

- Are simple
- Are clear
- Are independent of, or corrected for cultural factors
- Have cues that may help the deponent to remember
- Are structured to have interview start with non-emotional issues
- Avoid colloquial or ethnic expressions
- Avoid technical expressions or jargon
- Give adequate space for answers
- Do not ask for information the deponent is likely not to remember
- Will repeat the earlier question when referring back to an earlier question
- Ask specific questions rather than general ones
- Avoid double negatives, which can be confusing to the deponent
- Ask for only one response to each question (no multiple questions)
- Ask for the actual number, they don't collect numbers in classes

Note that these are general guidelines, not commandments. You will undoubtedly encounter circumstances in which, for sound reasons you will choose to violate one or another of these guidelines. However, when you do, it should be a deliberate choice on your part.

4.13 Why is interviewing so important?

Deponents (who may be victims, survivors, witnesses, perpetrators, etc., or take on several roles simultaneously) are a major source of data on human rights violations. The resources of perpetrators are great, those of individual monitors or NGOs, limited. Even those individuals or NGOs with a restricted mission often cannot oversee the whole arena of possible human rights violations in their area. To a large extent, human rights monitors are reactive, responding to reports brought by deponents, and then going to where the violations occurred, or to where survivors, or victims, or witnesses and observers can be found.

You may find that all or most of your data will come from deponents. For example, if you are concerned with torture victims you will obtain much of your data primarily from the reports of deponents directly as well as during physical examinations by health care personnel, who thus also become deponents.

Of course, this is not true for all circumstances. An NGO tracking judicial treatment of minority groups may get all its data from legal records and from observation of judicial processes rather than interviews with victims or other persons serving as sources. However, as we have discussed in the earlier chapters, many of the principles and procedures used for deponent interviews can be modified for these other forms of data collection.

4.14 What are the kinds of interviews useful in human rights data collection?

- The informal conversational interview
- The standardized interview
- The guided narrative interview

4.15 What is an informal conversational interview?

This is a conversation that follows a spontaneous course. There may or may not have been some planning and discussion of how the interview should be directed. A skilled, experienced interviewer probably does not need too much preparation; a less-skilled interviewer should probably have some pre-interview guidance (or a crib sheet). One of the more common ways in which this kind of interview is used is in collecting information from governmental officials at all levels from local police to high government officials. The “interview” is like a conversation or discussion with a journalist, even though it may have a purpose. (This is less threatening than a formal note-taking session.) The burden is on the interviewer to recover the data from such an interview afterwards, although note-taking and even taping may be allowed in some cases.

Because of the uncertain nature of reports that you may receive, such conversational interviews are often the first indication that there is a human rights problem developing. It would of course, be hard to have any but the most general questions in mind before having such an interview. Also, the psychological state of the

first observers or survivors of large-scale human rights violations may not be conducive to any kind of systematic or formal interview.

4.16 What is a standardized interview?

The standardized interview is the type that is almost invariably proposed by people when they are asked to set up an interview process. It is based on a set of questions (a “questionnaire” as discussed earlier) that are written out, and put in the order in which they are to be asked. Very little flexibility is built into the questionnaire. In fact, it is usually the intent of the designers to have the questions asked in exactly the way they are written and in exactly the order in which they appear. Quite specific instructions are often given to the interviewers and they may be trained to a uniform standard of behavior when interviewing deponents.

4.17 When is a standardized interview useful?

This approach makes sense when the nature of the data to be collected calls for complete control over the wording of the questions and the order in which they are asked. This type of questionnaire may be suitable for a deponent who is in a hurry and who is discussing issues that are largely unemotional and where the responses will not be influenced by imposing a rigid uniform order on the questions. This, however, is rarely the case in human rights work.

4.18 Is a standardized interview appropriate for human rights data collection?

The human rights deponent (victim, witness, survivor, perpetrator, etc.) is often a person with considerable emotional reaction to what they are reporting. Human rights deponents may have experienced severe trauma, both psychological and physiological, about which they have difficulty talking. They may come from cultures where literacy and strict date and counting conventions do not exist, and where a tradition of indirect recitation of events is deeply embedded in the culture. The standardized interview can be ineffective and unworkable in such situations. Use your judgment!

Example 4.1 Villagers with oral traditions for dates

Illiterate village inhabitants with a strong oral tradition were asked to supply dates when human rights violations occurred. They were simply unable to give any response that fit the date conventions of the interviewer and a questionnaire that originated in an industrialized country in Western Europe.

The resolution was to obtain a trained interviewer from the region, who knew that villagers dated events from major catastrophes or positive events, such as famines, floods, weddings, cultural events, etc. She knew the region’s history well enough to translate from the event dates to Western calendar dates.

Example 4.1 is a clear example of a situation in which the conflict between a written and oral culture interfered with data collection. Fortunately, the staff of the NGO was sensitive to these issues and responsive to their field personnel and the situation was

corrected.

Example 4.2 Dating events in Sierra Leone

A refugee assistance organization was trying to obtain dates of events in Sierra Leone, and found that the deponents they were working with had no calendar concepts in the Western sense and relatively few major events. One of the workers with experience in the country realized that the local people dated events with respect to the visit of the Queen of England to their country. This eased the situation for everyone.

It is usually possible to tape-record such an interview, or to record the answers directly into a form while talking to the deponent. But the form must be “free-form” — loose — and not restrictive in terms of subject matter.

4.19 What is a guided narrative interview?

Sooner or later, most human rights NGOs discover that the most effective interview for their purposes is a narrative form, in which the deponents *tell (narrate)* their story in the order in which it comes to them from their memory. This must be done, however, so that the questions that *must* be answered are not forgotten or overlooked. Thus, the interviewer will have a questionnaire or form available and may refer to it to be sure that no important questions have been missed.

Example 4.3 Interviewing in Guatemala

“.... we developed a less technical and more practical new set of forms. These forms helped guide the thread of the interview and allowed a more complete collection of information in a more orderly narrative manner.”⁶

Figure 4.6 Guided victim data narrative interview form (questionnaire) for the Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification⁷

1st last name	
2nd last name	
Name	
Other names	nicknames, war names, pseudonyms
Sex of the victim	M/F
Identity document.	number and date of issue; one of the following was accepted: Identity Card, Birth Certificate, Refugee Card, Demobilization Card, Passport. This information was almost never completed
Date of birth or age at the moment of the violation. Certainty of this information	there were several levels of certainty options: 1) total 2) 1-2 years 3) 3-5 years 4) 6-10 years 5) none
Nationality	text, not coded
Place of birth	department, municipality, town, village, with a code number from a coded geographical dictionary of Guatemala
Mother's language	A coded list of languages spoken in Guatemala, as well as other languages, was used to answer this question
Type of victim	multiple and non exclusive options were allowed here
Where did the victim live at the moment of the violation?	text, not coded
Was the victim forced to leave the place where she/he lived because of war?	Y/N
Name of the father	
Name of the mother	
Marital status	at the moment of the violation, options were: 1) single, 2) married 3) widowed 4) divorced
Name of the wife/husband	
Number of daughters and sons	dead or alive
Name and age of the daughters and sons.	for the age, the deponent had the option to tell the age at the moment of the violation, or the age when the testimony was given
Additional comments on the victim	text, not coded

4.20 What are some of the principles of good interviewing?

Interviewing is both an art and a science; and many – but not all – people can be taught the basic principles. Both research and field experience show that the single greatest problem with interviewers is *listening*. Interviewers tend not to listen enough. Some interviewers judge the deponent, or *appear* to judge the deponent while listening. Listening in the context of human rights violations is a fine art and calls for considerable self-discipline because of the emotion that is involved.

How best to show that you are listening? If the interviewer nods his/her head to indicate he/she is listening, the deponent may take this at best as a sign of agreement and at worst as a sign that the interviewer or the NGO is going to provide services to the deponent or correct injustices. A gentle nod may be adequate and safe, but there is no action as good as simply maintaining a silence and not making any overt signs.

One of the worst approaches for an interviewer is to become, or appear to be, an *interrogator*, as if he/she is collecting information for a police dossier or an administrative government application. First, it is quite possible that the deponent has had bad – very bad – experiences with police interrogations or governmental administrative processes.

Secondly, if the interrogatory attitude makes it sound as if the interviewer is judging the deponent, the interview will probably be unsuccessful in gaining useful data. Even without a subconscious feeling that the deponent has somehow behaved badly, an interviewer can communicate a judgmental tone that will make the deponent stop cooperating. We have seen this many times, even from sympathetic interviewers.

The pace of the questioning or guidance that the interviewer takes is also important. Studies and experience have shown that interviewers have a tendency to go too fast: too fast for the deponent to understand the question, too fast for them to fully recover their memories, and too fast to give the deponent a feeling that the testimony is important. Of course, there is always a shortage of resources, and in some cases, time. These pressures make it hard for the interviewer to be patient with someone who is having trouble providing emotionally loaded information. In the long run, it is better to have fewer, better interviews than more that are hurried and hence incomplete and inaccurate interviews.

Good interviewers:

- Listen.
- Do not judge.
- Establish rapport with the deponent.
- Adjust their body language, words, and pace to the deponent's needs.
- Start out the interview with questions about topics that are not emotionally loaded.

Not everyone can become a good interviewer in every situation. Selection, training, and evaluation of interviewers are essentials in every survey project.

We have just discussed all the factors that enter into the interviewing process.

When the conditions of good questionnaires and good interviewing are not met, the results can be biased, as we have discussed earlier in Chapter 3.

4.21 Can you get data from documentary and media reports?

As we have discussed, documents and media reports are important sources of data. Documentary evidence can range from scraps of recorded narrative complaints to an NGO to detailed and extensive government studies from which we seek to discover if economic and social rights are being denied or supported.

As mentioned, the forms on which such data are recorded for a database or analysis can be similar to (or even derived from) deponent questionnaires. Also similar are the problems with such data.

Remember that many documentary statistics are also collected through interviews or administrative processes and they can have many of the problems we have discussed. Thus, although you have not collected such data from deponents, a governmental or other organization may have done so, and you must anticipate all the same problems. You must scrutinize such studies, checking for consistency and lack of bias.

Example 4.4 Official crime statistics

What is your interest in collecting crime statistics from the national U.S. Uniform Crime Reporting Program? Do you want to know how many crimes each arrested person is charged with, which could tell you something about the behavior of the charged individuals? Or, do you want to know the extent to which they are multiple offenders? If the latter, then you should look elsewhere, because the definition of one arrest is “Count one (arrest) for each person (no matter how many offenses he is charged with) on each separate occasion (day) he is arrested or charged.”⁸

The lesson here is not to turn your back on the reports, but to find out how the variables and their values are defined and act in accordance with those findings, or look elsewhere.

Example 4.5 Regional trade deficits

You are comparing the economic status of various regions of the world by looking at regional trade deficits (a trade deficit occurs when current imports are more than exports). The World Bank publication *World Tables* gives these data. But the 1981 value for Middle Eastern and North African money flow does not include Iraq and Iran, unlike earlier entries. To learn this, you must read a footnote that appears four pages after the data entry.⁹

You can know the limitations of published data if you know what to look for and carefully read the footnotes and other “fine print.” If you know the data characteristics, then you can reconcile the differences and take the peculiarities of the data into account. But you must look for the qualifications!

Sometimes you can get useful data from the media.

Example 4.6 Political violence in El Salvador

For a period of time in the late 1970s, the U.S. Department of State estimated the number of deaths due to political violence in El Salvador by summarizing the data in the Salvadoran newspapers. Deaths reported in the press were reported as due to political violence if they could not be explained by other causes (criminal activity, unintentional injury, and so forth).

Such data have their problems. In El Salvador, the press reports were based on information received in a haphazard way from local sources, including the police. We expected that such reports would be low because of governmental bias. However, when we analyzed these data, we found that the press data rose and fell in the same pattern as the counts obtained by several NGOs that were tracking political killings. Since the NGOs collected their data on the ground, and not from the same sources as the press, and the data agreed, the U.S. Department of State reports could be taken as reasonable. Note however, that the newspaper counts were almost always the lowest.

Media reports must be used carefully. Often, numbers released to the media have no basis in fact; they are simply guesses or highly biased. As we have noted before, the media are subject to many sources of systematic error. Unfortunately, once an article is published it gains a life of its own. Subsequently it may be quoted again and again, each time gaining more undeserved credibility.

Example 4.7 Starvation deaths in West Africa

In 1977 the American journal *Newsweek* reported that “more than 100,000 West Africans perished of hunger” in the Sahel between 1968 and 1973. In seeking the source of this number, we found that it came from the UN Secretary-General’s message to the UN Desertification conference. When Julian Simon of the University of Illinois asked for the source of this number, he was sent a copy of the Secretary-General’s original statement, an excerpt from a UN memo, and a copy of a memo from an expert of African demography.

The UN memo excerpt said that it was impossible to compute the number of Africans who died of hunger in this case. The demographic expert’s memo estimated 100,000 as “an absolute, and most improbable upper limit.... Even as a maximum ... an unreal limit.” This number would seriously mislead an NGO trying to determine the need for famine relief resources in West Africa at the time.

Another serious problem with media reports is that they can be erroneous, as the demands for confirmation on most newspaper articles are not strict. Any careful reader of newspapers in the United States will observe that corrections to articles are often printed within one or more days. For example, the daily *New York Times* has a “Corrections” column on its second page, but not all newspapers are that vigilant or open about the errors they discover. Anyone collecting data from newspaper articles must stay alert to the possibility of printed corrections, or corrections that may be necessary to items already abstracted.

And reporters can be deliberately misled so skillfully that the errors will never appear in the corrections, as shown in Example 4.8, below.

Example 4.8 A lie becomes an international truth

“I had to admit I’d fallen victim to a lie, and my stories, which aired in cities around the world, repeated the lie,” reported video journalist Nancy Durham. This report came out a year after her story about a “gun-toting [Kosovar Albanian] soldier who saw her small sister die.” As a confirmation of our recommendation in this chapter that your front line of defense against bias is consistency checking, it was the lack of consistency in the stories given to her that finally led Nancy Durham to recognize that she had made news out of a lie. Kudos to Nancy Durham for admitting her mistake.¹⁰

In reports based on individual cases or anecdotes, the consequences of incorporating a lie such as this are extremely serious. However, in reports based on analysis of tens or hundreds or thousands of cases, a few bad data items such as this will may have little effect on the final conclusions.

This is not to say that you are not obligated to check every piece of data. There is no substitute for constant vigilance and scrutiny if your data is to withstand criticism.

4.22 What are the lessons of this chapter?

1. Your purpose and the analysis you intend to perform determine the nature of the questions that you will ask.
2. Determining the questions calls for clear and hard thinking about the concepts that you are trying to collect data about and calls for knowledge of the deponents, the situation, and the types of analysis you intend to perform.
3. Questions are numbered for easy reference.
4. Using decimal numbers for your questions will make it easier to add additional questions.
5. Whether a question is to be open-ended or closed-ended can be determined from the relative advantages and disadvantages of each as applied to your situation.
6. Don’t use closed-ended classes to obtain numerical values; you risk bias and can make it impossible to perform desired analyses. Always ask for the number.
7. Avoid “Don’t know” as a standard response. Decide what it is that is the appropriate alternate to a specific response.
8. Do not ask irrelevant questions. If a question does not lead back to your objective and desired analysis, reject it.
9. Separate the deponent’s identification from their responses to avoid disclosure and possible retaliation.
10. The demographic data requested should be sufficient to be used in all the types of analysis that you will want to perform, but should not include irrelevant information.
11. The principles of good questionnaire design are straightforward and easy to state, as in this chapter; but they are hard to carry out in practice. Make the

effort!

12. Of the three kinds of interview (informal conversational, standardized, and guided narrative), the guided narrative interview has usually proved to be best for human rights work. However, each has its place and the choice of which method to use should be a considered decision by the NGO.
13. Good interviewers are good listeners, and do not interrogate or judge the deponent. They establish rapport with the deponent and begin their interviews with neutral discussions. Some good interviewers are born, but most are trained.
14. Interviewers must work at pacing their interview, avoiding going too fast for the deponent.
15. Documents and media are important sources of data, but they are subject to many of the same sources of error as interviews, as well as their own unique problems.
16. When collecting documentary data, read the “fine print.” Be sure that you know the definitions and methods used to collect the data. You must be as critical of documentary sources as you are of your own data.
17. Media reports are notoriously unreliable. Corrections are not often given, and when they are, they are often hard to find.
18. Be vigilant and scrutinize!

4.23 Exercises

Exercise 4.1

The following is a description of a human rights violation for which a truth commission wishes to collect data to find out the nature of *attempted* killings.

Attempted killing by shooting	Person is shot and injured by live bullet, gunshot, bird shot, buck shot, pellets, rubber bullet , or possibly shot at close range or with deliberate intent to kill but not injured .
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Prepare a set of questions for this concept, using Figure 4.1 as a guide.

Exercise 4.2

The following is a description of a human rights violation for which a truth commission wishes to collect data to find out the nature of *attempted* killings.

Attempted killing by exposure	Attempt to kill person by subjecting him/her to extremes such as heat, cold, weather, exercise, and forced labor .
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Prepare a set of questions for this concept, using Figure 4.1 as a guide.

Exercise 4.3

Would you use closed-end or open-ended questions to get data on the following?

- Amount of money sent by migrant workers to family in their country of origin
- Place of birth
- Number of perpetrators attacking demonstrators
- Ethnic identity
- Treatment while in custody in regional police station

Exercise 4.4

In a study of the level of poverty of subsistence-level farmers, what demographic data would you collect? (Present in a systematic way as part of a questionnaire similar to Figure 4.3.)

Exercise 4.5

In collecting information about the nature of the perpetrators of gross human rights violations, what demographic data would you collect? (Present in a systematic way as part of a questionnaire similar to Figure 4.3 making use of the “menu” of personal data of Figure 4.5.)

Exercise 4.6

In *Huridocs Events Standard Formats: A Tool for Documenting Human Rights*

*Violations.*¹¹ The authors describe a sample event:

Edgar Desacula was arrested with Ramon Aguilar by members of the Pasay City Police Force at Roxas Boulevard at about 1:00 o'clock in the afternoon of November 18, 1978.

Desacula and Aguilar were brought to the police headquarters for questioning. Aguilar was immediately released. Desacula was passed to operatives of the Intelligence and Special Operations Group (ISOG) who conducted tactical interrogation and subjected to torture. Desacula was later charged with "Violation of Presidential Decree 1866 (Illegal Possession of Firearm in Furtherance of Rebellion)." Desacula has remained in detention.

Desacula, 23, single, and Aguilar, 26, married, both worked in the garment factory GenTex.

Edna Aguilar, wife of Ramon Aguilar, supplied information regarding the arrest. She also gave personal details of Desacula and Aguilar. She also sought the help of Atty. Ignacio, who provided legal assistance to the victims.

- a) Identify victim(s), perpetrator(s), intervening party(ies), source(s).
- b) What are the violations in this event?
- c) Prepare a form for the victim information and complete as best as you can from the available information in the even description above.
- d) Prepare a form for the perpetrator information and complete as best as you can from the available information in the even description above.
- e) Prepare a form for the intervening party information and complete as best as you can from the available information in the even description above.
- f) Prepare a form for the source information and complete as best as you can from the available information in the event description above.

Exercise 4.7

Potential deponents are reluctant to talk with representatives of your NGO because they fear intimidation or punishment from perpetrators and governmental officials. How would you encourage them to give you information?

Exercise 4.8

When we define the informal conversational interview we say that it is "One of the more common ways in which this kind of interview is used in collecting information from governmental officials at all levels from local police to high government officials." Why is this so?

Exercise 4.9 If you are not allowed to tape-record or take notes at an informal conversational interview, how will you make sure that you get an accurate record of the interview?

Exercise 4.10

Describe a human rights situation in which a standardized interview is either necessary or desirable.

Exercise 4.11

How do you feel when you are interviewed using a standardized interview? Are there situations in which you find it unsatisfactory? Satisfactory?

Exercise 4.12

We make a strong case for the use of guided narrative interviews. And yet, a great deal of interviewing uses standardized interviews. What are the reasons that an NGO might prefer the standardized interview to a guided narrative?

Exercise 4.13

In Example 4.3, Oliver Mazariegos says the Archbishop's team in Guatemala developed "more practical" questionnaires (forms) that "helped guide the thread of the interview." How would you go about designing the "thread of the interview" when you develop the questionnaire for a guided narrative interview?

Exercise 4.14

Figure 4.6 is the guided narrative interview form (questionnaire) for *victim* information. Using this form as your basis, and in a situation of interest to you, create a form for the information about a *perpetrator*.

Exercise 4.15

Figure 4.6 is the guided narrative interview form (questionnaire) for *victim* information. Using this form as your basis, and in a situation of interest to you, create a form for the information about a *deponent who is a witness*.

Exercise 4.16

Under the heading "What are the major principles of good questionnaire design?" we give a series of principles. After you have made a questionnaire, how would you determine that you have met these requirements?

Exercise 4.17

Under the heading "What are some of the principles of good interviewing?" we give a series of principles. After having trained your interviewers, how would you determine that they are meeting these standards?

Exercise 4.18

When economic data are collected over a long period of time, governments and associations must modify the definition to account for changes in the nature of economic activities. This creates the problem of **non-comparability**, which can be dealt with if you know and understand what changes were made and why. If you were studying economic data for a given nation, how would you find out what changes have been made?

Exercise 4.19

In a country that you are familiar with, what are the biases that you would expect to find in media reports (newspapers, magazines, TV, radio)? How might these biases affect the human rights data you get from these sources?

Exercise 4.20

If you found that reports of killings by the army were reported as rising in interview and documentary reports, but declining in press reports, what actions might you suspect on the part of the government?

Notes

¹ Dueck, J., Guzman, M., Verstappen, B., *HURIDOCS Events Standard Formats: A Tool for Documenting Human Rights Violations (Revised Second Edition)*, Versoix (Switzerland): HURIDOCS, 2001, pp. 10-13.

² With thanks to Galloway, A., *Questionnaire Design and Analysis*, <http://www.tardis.ed.ac.uk/~kate/qmcweb/qcont.htm>, site created by Galloway, K., last updated 25/8/97, and accessed 26 November 2000.

³ This situation is worse than it seems. The number over 50 may be only 20% of the victims, but since the number of over-50 persons in the population may be disproportionately lower than those of lower ages, the rate of victimization may be high.

⁴ A listing of methods of encryption is posted at <http://catalog.com/sft/encrypt.html> (June 7, 2001). A tutorial for beginner is available at <http://hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey/backend/security/tutorials/tutorial1.html> (June 7, 2001). Encryption can have many implications and you will do best to seek a specialist in database encryption to assist you or your organization in security measures.

⁵ Dueck, et. al., op. cit, pp. 36-37; Ball, P., Spierer, H., and Spierer, L., *Making the Case: Investigating Large Scale Human Rights Violations Using Information Systems and Data Analysis*, Washington DC: AAAS, 2000, pp. 71-81, 111-117, 213.

⁶ Mazariegos, op. cit. Chapter 6, p.3.

⁷ Mezquita, R. The Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification: *Data Processing*, Chapter 8 of Ball, P., Spierer, H., and Spierer, L., *Making the Case: Investigating Large Scale Human Rights Violations Using Information Systems and Data Analysis*, Washington DC: AAAS, 2000, p. 213.

⁸ Spierer, H., Spierer, L. and Jaffe, A. *Misused Statistics*, 2nd ed. revised. NY: Marcel Dekker, 1998, p. 61.

⁹ The World Bank, *World Tables, Volume I – Economic Data from the Data Files of the World Bank*, 3rd ed. Baltimore: 1983, pp. 534, 538.

¹⁰ Durham, N. Casualties of war. *Brill's Content*, October 1999, pp. 82-85.

¹¹ Dueck, et. al., op. cit, p. 14.