

## CHAPTER V

### COLLECTING THE DATA

Because the major interest in the present study was self-teaching behavior during normal daily life—not in an artificial situation—information was obtained from forty adults who had recently engaged spontaneously in self-teaching. During an interview each adult was asked to recall certain aspects of his behavior, to describe them, and to complete several questionnaires. In this way data were collected concerning the teaching tasks that the self-teachers performed, their difficulties with those tasks, and the people who assisted.

Before the series of interviews began, a list of twelve tasks that self-teachers might perform, and a classification scheme consisting of seven types of assistants, were developed as described in the two previous chapters. The present chapter will describe the procedure for selecting the sample of self-teachers and the procedure followed during the interviews with them.

#### *The Sample of Self-teachers*

It was decided that all forty interviewees must be college graduates. It was assumed that college graduates would be especially likely to have experience and competence in self-teaching, to have fairly good insight into their own feelings and behavior, and to recall clearly their self-teaching project. Also, Johnstone and Rivera found that college graduates are more likely to have conducted a self-teaching project than are other adults.<sup>1</sup> Of the forty subjects with whom an interview was successfully completed, six had earned a professional degree (in social work or library science, for example) after graduating from college. Seven had earned a master's degree; three of these had also completed at least one year beyond the master's degree.

An attempt was made to obtain subjects with a wide range of ages, although the minimum age was set at twenty-one years. The ages of the forty subjects ranged from twenty-three to sixty years; the mean was thirty-five. Twenty-two of the interviewees were in their twenties, five in their thirties, seven in their forties, five in their fifties, and one in his sixties.

All interviewees had to be residents in the metropolitan area of Toronto, Ontario. Approximately equal numbers of men and women were sought: the sample consisted of twenty-one men and nineteen women.

Subjects from a diversity of occupations were sought, except that full-time students were excluded. The forty adults included seven housewives, six business executives, six social workers, four secondary-school and college teachers, three professional engineers, three librarians, and two lawyers. The sample also in-

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<sup>1</sup>Johnstone and Rivera, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

cluded one research dietician, community development officer, meteorologist, economist, geographer, sportscaster, nurse, broadcaster-writer, and editorial assistant.

An attempt to obtain a sample that was rigorously representative of all college graduates in metropolitan Toronto or of some other population did not seem appropriate at an early stage of research into self-teaching. Consequently, the writer asked his students, friends, and relatives to suggest any college graduates who might be willing to be interviewed. He did not set any other criteria; for example, he did not request that the individuals be especially active in learning or in self-teaching. He then interviewed thirty-five of these suggested individuals (four of whom were not interviewed successfully) plus nine of his own close friends and relatives. The major criteria for deciding which individuals to interview were a college degree, age, and occupation; no attempt was made to interview only people who were especially likely to have taught themselves recently.

### *Conducting the Interviews*

The writer interviewed each of the forty subjects in some place that was quiet and free from interruptions. Some interviews were conducted in the subject's home, some in the interviewer's home, and a few in private offices. Usually both the interviewer and the subject sat at a table. Most interviews lasted about two hours, but the length ranged from one and a half hours to three hours. If necessary, the interviewer explained that he was engaged in a research project as part of his doctoral work at the University of Chicago.

Before starting the series of forty interviews, the interviewer took several steps to increase their effectiveness. During eleven initial interviews he developed, tested, and several times revised an interview schedule and three questionnaires. Three faculty members at the University of Chicago criticized his typewritten interview schedule, and one faculty member criticized two initial interviews that had been recorded on tape.

During each of the forty interviews, the interviewer proceeded as follows, making any alterations necessary because of a particular subject or situation. First, after some casual conversation and after both people were seated, the interviewer explained, "In my research I am interested in how adults go about learning things when they learn without attending a course or paying for private lessons. During the interview we will choose one thing that you have tried to learn during the past year, and I will ask you certain questions about the ways in which you went about learning it. This sheet describes the sorts of learning that can be included." As he said this, the interviewer placed a duplicated sheet in front of the subject. This sheet is reproduced as the first interview sheet in Appendix A.

If the subject did not quickly recall something that he had learned during the past year, the interviewer assisted his memory by placing in front of him a sheet that listed twenty-six things "that adults sometimes learn" (second interview sheet in Appendix A). The first fifteen items on this list and their order, were based largely on the Johnstone and Rivera findings concerning the subject

matter that is self-taught by a relatively large number of people.<sup>1</sup> Some of the other items were less commonly recalled in Johnstone's study and some were suggested during the initial interviews of the present study.

The criteria for selecting one example of each subject's self-teaching were based on the definition of self-teaching. As the subject mentioned one or more things that he had learned, the interviewer tried to determine whether each example met the following criteria:

1. the goals (desired knowledge and skills) were fairly definite and clear;
2. the adult had a strong desire to achieve that goal; that is, it was important to him;
3. he had spent at least eight hours at the project during the previous year; and
4. he himself, rather than any professional teacher, had assumed the primary responsibility for planning, controlling, and supervising the entire project.

If the subject mentioned more than one project that met all four criteria, the interviewer listed only the first two or three. The interviewer then chose the one in which the subject seemed most clearly to have satisfied the fourth criterion.

After the one example of self-teaching had been selected, the interviewer explained that he would ask four or five general questions in order to gain an understanding of the entire project, would then ask several specific questions, and would ask two general questions at the end. He then asked about, and recorded in some detail, the following aspects of the one self-teaching project that had been chosen:

1. the goal (a brief, general statement of what knowledge and skills the subject wanted to learn);
2. reasons or purposes for selecting and pursuing this goal;
3. several specific areas of knowledge and skill that were learned;
4. the activities in which the subject engaged in order to learn (what he read; from whom he obtained information and advice; whether he also observed, practiced, or performed some other learning activity);
5. the month during which the project began;
6. the month during which the project ended, or some indication of the current status of the project (for example, it might have been temporarily laid aside, or the subject's efforts might be tapering off).

The subject was then asked to list the people who were somehow connected with his efforts to learn. He was given a sheet of instructions (the third interview sheet in Appendix A) for making this list. When he could not remember any other individuals, he was given another sheet to stimulate his recall (the fourth interview sheet in Appendix A). Only the individuals who were later selected by the subject while describing one or more tasks were to be included in the analysis of data; consequently, the subject was encouraged at this stage to list as many individuals as possible.

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<sup>1</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

The interviewer then classified each of the listed individuals according to the classification scheme described in the previous chapter. After describing each category, he asked the subject to state which individuals on his list could fit into that category. Individuals who seemed difficult to classify were discussed until the appropriate category became evident.

Next, the interviewer explained that the time had come to shift attention to some of the tasks (such as making certain decisions and dealing with certain problems) that adults might perform while trying to teach themselves. The subject was told that descriptions of certain tasks had been typewritten on cards, and that he would be asked to describe the extent to which he had performed each task.

A description of the first task, typewritten double-spaced on a five-by-eight inch white card, was then placed in front of the subject. He was asked whether this task had been performed at all during his self-teaching project. On a three-by-five inch memo sheet, the interviewer recorded the specific parts of the task that had been performed plus any other relevant data. If necessary, he helped the subject to understand the task and to relate it to his particular project. The subject was then asked to complete a duplicated questionnaire for this task; a copy is reproduced as the first questionnaire in Appendix A. On this questionnaire the subject indicated how many times he had considered or performed the task, how much time he and other people had spent performing it, and the extent to which other people had helped him perform it.

On the same questionnaire the subject indicated whether any part of the task had been especially difficult to perform or had caused some worry or concern. If the subject replied in the affirmative, the interviewer asked him about the exact nature of the difficulty or concern. If the subject replied affirmatively to the final printed question, which asked whether he would have liked *more* assistance with this task, the interviewer asked him to describe exactly how other people could have helped him. All of the qualitative information described in this paragraph was recorded in detail by the interviewer on three-by-five inch memo sheets.

The first questionnaire was, at least for a few subjects, fairly difficult to answer. For example, each subject had to translate the given task into some meaningful aspect of his own project. When discussing the task of obtaining resources, for instance, he had to translate the general description of the task into some particular terms such as the following (in his own mind): "I often went next door to ask Jim and across the street to ask Peter. Occasionally I went to the library. I bought that one pocketbook, and my wife gave me another pocketbook." Then, on the questionnaire, he had to estimate the total number of times that he performed all of these parts of the task, and the total amount of time spent doing so.

Unless the subject had indicated on the first questionnaire that no one had helped him with this task, he was asked to complete a second duplicated questionnaire, which is reproduced in Appendix A. On this second questionnaire he indicated which of the people on his list had helped with part of the task. After placing the questionnaire beside his list, the subject circled *yes* beside each person who had assisted with the task and *no* beside each person who had not. This second questionnaire also encouraged the subject to add to his list any additional people who had assisted with the task.

For each of the other eleven tasks, this entire procedure was repeated. After reading the card describing the task, the subject was asked how it applied to his particular project. He then marked his responses to five questions on a questionnaire, and on a second questionnaire marked the people who assisted with the task. He was asked to describe in detail any difficulties or concerns with the task, and any other ways in which people could have helped him. The exact wording used on the cards, and the order in which the tasks were presented to each subject, were reproduced in the previous chapter.

The subject was then asked to look at all twelve cards again in order to select the two tasks that had required the most time. He was encouraged to sort the cards into two or more piles in order to select these two cards. Then he was asked to select the two tasks that had caused the greatest difficulty or concern—"the two most troublesome tasks."

Near the end of the interview, the subject was asked the following general question:

We have now finished dealing with several of the important tasks that you performed. In addition to the tasks on the cards, perhaps you remember performing some *other* tasks, or making some other decisions, or dealing with certain problems and emotions. I would be very interested in hearing about some of these things.

The interviewer encouraged the subject to talk about these other tasks in some detail, and recorded them on memo sheets as precisely as he could.

Finally, before thanking the subject and ending the interview, the interviewer asked him to complete a duplicated questionnaire that requested the following demographic data: sex, highest year of formal education completed, occupation, and year of birth.

### *Recording the Data*

Each subject completed between fourteen and twenty-four questionnaires dealing with the tasks. For each subject, the responses on these questionnaires were recorded on one summary chart containing 180 cells. This chart recorded, for each task, the response to each of the five questions on the first questionnaire, whether this task was one of the two most time-consuming or more troublesome, and the number of people of each type (and the total number of people) that helped with the task. Each memo sheet containing qualitative data was checked to be certain that its meaning would later be clear and that it noted the number of the task (or other title) and the code number assigned to the subject.