

# Interactional Troubles in Face-to-Face Survey Interviews

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## 1. INTERVIEWS AS INTERACTION

For statistically based social science, survey research is the principal means of obtaining data about the social world. The interview from this point of view is a standardized data-collection procedure that uses a questionnaire as its instrument of measurement; however, the interview is an essentially interactional event as well. From the moment that the interviewer sits down across from the respondent and begins to talk, the survey interview assumes and relies on a wealth of conventions and resources from ordinary conversation. At the same time, the concern with standardized procedures and the statistical notion of error that standardization is intended to address impose constraints on the survey interview that make it significantly different from ordinary conversation. Those constraints have consequences for both the way the interview proceeds and the data that it produces.

In this article we look at the survey interview as a standardized procedure that relies on, but also suppresses, crucial elements of ordinary conversation. Our analysis is based on videotapes of five special interviews, three using the General Social Survey (GSS) and two using the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). The videotapes were made for research purposes in conjunction with the Seminar on Cognitive Aspects of Survey Methodology sponsored by the Committee on National Statistics of the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education of the National Research Council. [For a report on that seminar see Jabine, Straf, Tanur, and Tourangeau (1984).] They show interviews with volunteer respondents. Trained U.S. Census Bureau interviewers were hired by the committee to administer the NHIS questionnaire as they would for the survey; similarly, trained interviewers administered the GSS questionnaires. These particular interviews, however, were not part of the respective surveys. Our analysis of the videotapes was carried out during the summer of 1986, funded by the Committee on Cognition and Survey Research of the Social Science Research Council and by Xerox Palo Alto Research Center. We take the

five interviews as case studies that reveal classes of trouble of a potentially more widespread nature. Although we cannot know the precise distribution of such troubles across survey interviews, their presence in these five at least raises the possibility of a more general problem. Our discussions of the data with veteran survey researchers lead us to believe that the troubles identified are not totally idiosyncratic.

Our argument is the following.

1. There is an unresolved tension between the survey interview as an interactional event and as a neutral measurement instrument. On the one hand, the interview is commonly acknowledged to be fundamentally an interaction. On the other hand, in the interest of turning the interview into an instrument, many of the interactional resources of ordinary conversation are disallowed.

2. The success of the interview as an instrument turns on the premise that (a) relevant questions can be decided in advance of the interaction and (b) questions can be phrased in such a way that, as long as they are read without variation, they will be heard in the intended way and will stimulate a valid response.

3. The premises of 2 fail insofar as (a) topics that come from outside a conversation run the risk of irrelevance, and (b) as an ordinary language procedure, the survey interview is inherently available for multiple interpretations of the meaning of both questions and answers.

4. Compared with ordinary conversation, the survey interview suppresses those interactional resources that routinely mediate uncertainties of relevance and interpretation.

We find that the validity of survey data is potentially undermined by the same prohibition against interaction that is intended to ensure reliability. As a remedy, we recommend a collaborative approach that would allow the kinds of interactional exchanges between interviewer and respondent necessary to ensure standardized interpretations, without introducing interviewer bias. This idea was advanced by Briggs (1986) and Mishler (1986), but it has yet to receive the exploration that it deserves and the development that would enable its serious incorporation into survey research practice.

The analysis is organized as follows. In Section 2 we look at the differences between the survey interview and ordinary conversation, focusing on the survey instrument's external control over who speaks and on what topic, prohibitions against any redesign of questions by the inter-

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viewer and special requirements placed on the form of answers, problems of question relevance and meaning, and failures in the detection and repair of misunderstanding. Section 3 makes recommendations for a research program to explore a more collaborative, interactional approach to achieving survey reliability and validity.

## 2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE INTERVIEW AND CONVERSATION

The interviewer is charged with the responsibility of conducting *inquiry* in something of the manner of a *conversation*. The product of the encounter is supposed to be good "hard" data—the stuff of codes and numbers and computer analysis. The process is supposed to be at least somewhat "soft"—the stuff of pleasant acquaintance. (Converse and Schuman 1974, p. 22)

In what follows we look closely at just how the survey interview is "in the manner of a conversation" and, more important, how it is not. The constraints on the interview we observe that distinguish it from ordinary conversation are all imposed in the interest of *standardization*. Standardization is what identifies the interview process as a scientific procedure. To ensure the standardization of the procedure, the interactivity of ordinary conversational processes is suppressed. Nevertheless we argue that this strategy mistakes sameness of words for stability of meanings. Stability of meaning, the real basis for standardization and ultimately for validity, requires the full resources of conversational interaction.

### Local Versus External Control

Researchers interested in face-to-face communication have taken ordinary, naturally occurring conversation as the primary form of interaction, and as the baseline for their analyses. [See Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). For useful surveys of recent work in conversation analysis, see Levinson (1983) and Heritage (1985).] The organizational properties of ordinary conversation represent the minimal constraints required for orderly, mutually intelligible talk. The central organizational feature of ordinary conversation is that who talks, and about what, is controlled from within the conversation by the participants.

In an important sense, local control over the conversation is what sustains participants' interest in talking to each other. The basic assumption in ordinary conversation is that the participants will find a topic that is of mutual interest and explore it to whatever depth they choose. In contrast to this local control from within the conversation, the survey instrument is constructed ahead of time and is imposed on the participants from the outside. The interviewer is the administrator of the survey researcher's agenda, and the respondent is a data point in the sample. Turns at talk are preallocated such that invariably the interviewer asks the questions and the respondent answers them. The choice and order of topics—what is talked about and when—is established by an absent third party, and is not subject to alteration according to any local interests of either interviewer or respondent.

The questionnaire designer attempts to control not only *what* gets talked about in the interview, but precisely *how*

topics get talked about as well. In particular, the standardized procedural model of the interview is enforced through the mandate that the interviewer effectively *not* be available for interaction. Interviewers are enjoined (though perhaps with only limited success) against any variation from the question as written. This injunction against interaction reflects the idea that the survey interview has been successfully standardized only to the extent that there is no variation in the words that the interviewer speaks. We return to the problems in this notion of standardization in the following, and suggest an alternative. For the moment, we observe simply that one result of the invariance approach to standardization is that although the interview has the superficial appearance of interaction (two or more people sit down facing one another to talk), that appearance is misleading. As respondents realize that their expectations for ordinary conversation are violated (and violated without recourse), they may react with boredom (with consequent intellectual if not physical withdrawal) and impatience (resulting in answers designed to "get it over with"). More fundamentally, the injunction against interaction means that certain basic resources for establishing shared understanding, essential to successful communication, are effectively prohibited.

### Recipient Design of Questions

To the extent that ordinary conversation is locally controlled, speakers can be sensitive to the history of the current talk and can accommodate specific hearers. In contrast, interviewers are trained not to redesign questions based on either information acquired in previous responses or the observable circumstances of a particular respondent. Questions cannot be modified on the spot as they would be in ordinary conversation, but rather must be designed for anyone and must exhaust the range of possible circumstances. The use of an exhaustive specification of conditions, in advance of a response, is intended to obviate the need for negotiation between interviewer and respondent. This strategy, however, results in questions that are awkward and whose construction is difficult to parse. Typically, we get a string of "or's" or modifying clauses incorporated into the question itself. [The examples in this article are meant to illustrate a class of interactional troubles. The following transcript notation is used: \* denotes an item of analytic interest, :: denotes a prolongation of the preceding word, // is the point of onset of overlapping talk, · indicates falling intonation, ? represents rising intonation, and — denotes an abrupt shift or break in an ongoing utterance. Speakers are designated as I (interviewer), R (single respondent), Mrs. (wife in family interviews), Mr. (husband in family interviews), or the first initial of an additional family member.]

\*I: During those two weeks, did anyone in the family receive health care at home or go to a doctor's office, clinic, hospital or some other place. Include care from a nurse or anyone working with or for a medical doctor. Do not count times while an overnight patient in a hospital.

Mrs.: (pause) No:: (NHIS, E family)

