

# 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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