

Problems of Standardization in Standardized Survey Interviews

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In order to minimize measurement errors, the survey interview must be maximally standardized across all aspects of the measurement process. All respondents must be presented with the same stimuli. In order to achieve this, questions should be fully scripted and they should mean the same to every respondent. Interviewers must follow the rules of standardized interviewer behavior.

According to Fowler & Mangione (1990) these rules are:

1. Read the questions exactly as worded.
2. If the respondent's answer is incomplete or inadequate, probe for clarification or elaboration in a non-directive way.
3. Record the answers without interviewer's discretion
4. Do not provide any positive or negative feedback to regarding the specific content of respondent's answers

Several studies in which interviewer-respondent interactions were coded show that interviewers often do not act according to the rules of standardized interviewing. The remedy that is usually advocated is that interviewers should be trained better (e.g. Beatty 1995).

Based on research on actual interaction in survey interviews, I take the view that, generally speaking, the fundamental problem lies not in poor interviewer behavior, but in a number of incorrect assumptions that underly the concept of standardized interviewing.

Standardized wording vs. standardized meaning

When Fowler & Mangione (1990:136-7) state that questions should be fully scripted, and that they should mean the same to every respondent, the authors assume that standardized question wording and standardized meaning go together. In this view the linguistic meaning of a question coincides with the researcher's intended meaning and the purpose of the question, and respondents will interpret the question as the author meant it. It is a popular belief that language is a conduit for the transfer of thought (Reddy 1979): In our mind there is thought T, we wrap T in language and send this parcel to the addressee/respondent, who then unwraps it, thus putting the initial thought into his

or her mind. However, depending on respondents' personal backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences, as well as on the information they already volunteered during the interview, and of which they know that the interviewer knows (Grice 1975), they may interpret the meaning and/or the purpose of the question in a different way than the questionnaire designer intended. Therefore different respondents may end up with different interpretations. And indeed, the many studies on respondents interpreting survey questions (e.g. Belson 1981) show that almost any word or concept used in questionnaires may be interpreted in more than one way.

When survey methodology expresses the desire to present all respondents with the same question, it really means that all respondents should be presented with the same meaning-as intended by the researcher, rather than with the same question formulation.

Standardized interviewing vs. flexible interviewing

When respondents ask what is meant by a question, the rules for standardized interviewing instruct interviewers to not clarify the question. They are allowed to say 'Whatever it means to you', which already acknowledges that a single question may have different meanings for different respondents. Interviewers may also use the conduit metaphor and say 'It's just what the question says'. Although such replies do not make the meaning of a question much clearer, respondents will usually provide an answer to the question nevertheless.

In my view, when some respondents are not able to extract the intended meaning from the question formulation, we need the interviewer to act as a spokesperson for the researcher (cf. Suchman & Jordan 1990). Interviewers should be properly informed about the research, the questionnaire and each question, so they will be in the position (at least to some extent) to explain and clarify questions when needed. This will increase response validity. As a field experiment by Schober & Conrad (1997) has shown, interviewers who were informed about the meaning of the concepts used in the questions, and who were allowed to clarify concepts by improvising, generated more valid data than interviewers who did not clarify concepts when asked by the respondents.

Standardized interviewing rules vs. Conversational rules

The quest for standardized interviewing presupposes the possibility of human interaction to be standardized. As far as the role of the interviewer is concerned, text books such as the one by Fowler and Mangione, are quite clear in what the interviewers should and should not do. However, the survey interview also involves respondents. Respondents are not instructed in how they are supposed to behave, and even in case they know the rules, they have no special

reason to strictly obey these rules. Over the last 10 years an increasing number of detailed studies on interviewer-respondent interaction have shown that respondents, to a certain extent, apply the interactional rules of mundane conversation (see e.g., Suchman & Jordan 1990, Houtkoop-Steenstra 2000, Schaeffer & Maynard 1996). And respondents seem to expect the interviewer to follow these rules as well. A crucial aspect of ordinary conversation is that speakers design their talk for their specific recipient, a phenomenon referred to as >recipient design=. This, for example, means that a recipient does not expect the speaker to ask for information that both parties know the speaker already has. In survey interviews however, respondents are often confronted with such redundant questions. A respondent who mentions Amy wife@ should not assume that the interviewer will infer from this that the respondent is married. This runs fundamentally contrary to the way individuals deal with information, both in ordinary conversation and in various types of institutional discourse. Studies in survey interviewing show that respondents have a hard time realizing that survey interviewers are not supposed to draw inferences. It seems reasonable to allow survey interviewers to draw inferences and then verify them with the respondents. Since verification can easily be done in a leading manner, verification is an important interviewing technique that interviewers should be trained in.

The general difficulty respondents seem to have is that, rather than treating the interviewer as an interactional partner, they should know that the interviewer=s role is to read whatever is scripted and to tick the appropriate response box. Although interviewers sound and look like human creatures, one should nevertheless treat them as mindless machines.

When respondents in survey literature cultures have troubles playing this language game according to the rules, we might expect it to be even more problematic for cultures and countries where people are less used to the standardized interview (cf. Greenfield 1997 on cross-cultural assessments). The increase in cross-cultural survey research is another reason to consider how standardized we want the standardized interview to be.

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