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William Foddy

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CONSTRUCTING QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS AND QUESTIONNAIRES

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CONSTRUCTING
QUESTIONS FOR
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THEORY AND PRACTICE
IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

William Foddy

*Department of Anthropology and Sociology,
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Preface

More than forty years ago, George Gallup (1947:385), the director of the American Institute of Public Opinion, observed that:

students of public opinion are fast coming to the realization that, relatively speaking, too much attention has been directed toward sample design, and too little toward question design . . . differences in question design often bring results which show far greater variation than those normally found by different sampling techniques . . .

Thirty years later, Gallup felt the need to repeat these views in a foreword to a reprinting of Stanley Payne's classic work, *The Art of Asking Questions* (1951):

While great strides have been made in improved sampling design and technique — and electronic data processing has given us almost immediate access to the survey findings themselves — there has not been a comparable amount of progress in perfecting question or questionnaire design.

About the same time similar comments were made by Belson (1981:11) in his introduction to a report of a major investigation that he and his colleagues had conducted on the way respondents interpret survey questions:

At the time this study was designed, relatively few reports of empirically based research into the understanding of survey questions had been published. Since the appearance of the present report in mimeograph form, very little else has appeared. It is to nobody's credit that anything so important to survey research should have been so neglected.

Today, another ten years on, it would still have to be said that the theory of

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question wording has not been as far advanced as one might wish. Although a number of studies have been carried out to increase our understanding of question-answer processes, there are few signs that social researchers have made major improvements in their ways. In his foreword to Payne's book, Gallup suggests that two factors explain this lack of progress. First, the acceptance and growth of survey research in business and the increased dependence of the media and industry on information derived from marketing and opinion polls have spawned a demand for instant results which does not lend itself to concern about how questions should be worded. Second, the growth of the allied social research professions has inevitably drawn many people into the field who have little interest in the methodological issues underlying the collection of verbal data. In the main, social researchers have been content to rely on common sense and a few rules based on past, collective experience. Few attempts have been made to integrate the methodological issues that have been discussed in the literature and little effort has been directed toward applying the conclusions that have been advanced.

Stanley Payne's book, first published in 1951, is still one of the most widely read and cited texts on the methodology of question formulation. Most writers of survey methodology texts have devoted little more than a few pages to the problems associated with the construction of questions to be used in interviews and questionnaires. For instance, the authors of the widely used and respected text, *Research Methods in Social Relations* (Kidder and Judd, 1986, 5th edn), devote fewer than twenty pages to these problems. In similar fashion Converse and Presser (1986) allot less than half of their eighty-page monograph, *Survey Questions: Handcrafting the Standardized Questionnaire*, to them. The other half of their text is spent discussing pre-testing procedures. There have, in fact, been more books devoted to the problems associated with actually conducting interviews than there have to the prior task of formulating questions. There have also been numerous texts on sampling procedures for selecting respondents and on statistical techniques for analysing data once they have been collected. But these books do not allow us to escape the simple truth that questions are the foundation stones upon which most contemporary social science rests. If our ability to ask questions that are understood as intended has not been as good as we might have wished it to be (and there is lots of evidence that this is the case), social science will continue to suffer until something is done about it. As computer buffs are fond of muttering, it is a case of 'garbage in, garbage out'.

Of course the remarks that have just been made should not be construed as suggesting that procedures for collecting verbal data are worse than procedures that produce other kinds of data for the social sciences (e.g. observational procedures, unobtrusive measures and procedures for the content analysis of documentary material). Indeed they are not likely to be. My remarks are meant, however, to suggest that it is high time to press for improvements in the procedures we use to collect verbal data.

This book, then, attempts both to integrate past insights into how questions

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should be formulated and to develop these insights further. Successive chapters are aimed at reinforcing a number of fundamental but related principles that are assumed to underlie question–answer behaviour. It does not deal with such problems as: how to go about drawing representative samples, how to lay out questionnaires, how to go about actually conducting interviews, or how to go about analysing data once they have been collected. It is not that I do not recognise the importance of these topics, it is simply that I recognise that they have been handled well by others. There are many good books on sampling and applied statistics. In addition, there are books such as Dillman’s (1978) book, *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method*, that give a thorough account of how questionnaires and interview schedules should be laid out. Books such as *Contemporary Field Research*, edited by Emerson (1983), and *Standardised Survey Interviewing* by Fowler and Mangione (1990), deal extremely well with the human relations side of unstructured and structured interviews. This book is directed, instead, toward the task of increasing the general level of understanding of the nature of verbal data with the ultimate goal of increasing the validity of the questions we use. It represents an attempt to take interviews and questionnaires seriously, ‘in much the same way as physicists take particle accelerators seriously’ — one of the recommendations made by the Panel on Survey Measures of Subjective Phenomena of the National Academy of Sciences (Smith, 1984b:228–229).

It should be emphasised that taking questioning procedures seriously does not mean that they are seen as mechanical procedures which can be improved without regard to either the properties of the interactants or the contexts in which they are used. I am sympathetic to the view which has been forcefully expressed by Douglas (1985):

Creative interviewing is purposefully situated interviewing. Rather than denying or failing to see the situation of the interview as a determinant of what goes on in the questioning and answering processes, creative interviewing embraces the immediate, concrete situation; tries to understand how it is affecting what is communicated; and, by understanding these effects, changes the interviewer’s communication processes to increase the discovery of the truth about human beings. The structured interviewer is like the ignorant swimmer who fights against a powerful rip tide and finally succumbs to the tide because of exhaustion. Creative interviewers try to divine the flow of the rip and to swim with it in order to eventually gain control of the outcome — saving themselves. You can’t beat the reality of human nature and the communication processes that flow from that nature, so you might as well understand them and then work with them to triumph over ignorance and falsehood. (Douglas, 1985:22) [my emphasis]

A basic assumption behind most of the arguments in this text is that question–answer behaviour involves complex interrelationships between sociological, psychological and linguistic variables.

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A major issue that is addressed is the question of the degree to which the *kinds* of answers respondents are required to give must be specified if successful communication is to occur between interviewers and respondents. This issue has been at the centre of many past methodological discussions and I have accorded it central significance here. Indeed, the principal thesis advanced in this book is that most of the problems associated with the construction of questions are either avoided or lessened in importance by a clear specification of the kind of answers that respondents should give. I hasten to add that by using the phrase ‘kind of answers’ I do not want to suggest that respondents should be pressured into giving this or that substantive response. The concept of ‘kind of answer’ is explained at length in chapters 3–6.

Finally, I would like to stress that, because this book is an attempt to deal with fundamental aspects of question–answer behaviour, it is directed at all those who use questions in social research. Although many of the examples I have used to illustrate particular issues have been taken from the survey research literature, the matters that they raise have a wider relevance. Certainly I had in mind social science in general, and not just social surveys, as I worked on each of the chapters. My hope is that sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, social psychologists, social policy researchers, social workers, pollsters and market researchers will all find the contents of this text useful.

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