UNKNOWN RESEARCH: BETWEEN PREPARATION AND EVALUATION
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We will not diverge too far from the truth if we assume that most researchers taking part in social research consider the period of field data collection as a sort of unwelcome pause between two important acts: preparation and evaluation. As if their work stopped at that moment, as if the raging mountain river of current research hid somewhere in the rocks and underground caverns in order to reappear after a time quietly burbling somewhere down in the valley.

In view of the above, it is relatively easy to understand that the situation of data acquisition in social research has not been explored yet very well in practice or in theory. This means that sometimes, it can be reduced, using simplified terms, to a series of questions which the interviewer asks and responses which the respondent provides, i.e. more or less to the position of the impetus – response behaviouristic paradigm. The interaction of parties involved is understood literally as a managed conversation within which each party has a clearly defined role and tasks related thereto. In this concept, the respondent is a passive element whose task is only to hear out a question and respond to it in a true manner. To the contrary, activity is expected from the person of the interviewer. This "activity", however, actually only involves presenting questions with a prescribed wording and in a prescribed order, careful recording of responses in a defined manner prepared in advance and directing the conversation using standardised means in cases when the respondent is not able to or capable of accepting his/her passive role. Any other forms of communication, side information channels or hidden communication are a priori excluded because they would interfere with the unity of conditions or the requirement for standardisation. Several basic rules of leading the conversation, stated usually in manuals and instructions for interviewers, are sufficient, for the most part, for us, researchers, to be satisfied with knowing that the river indeed is flowing in the underground, that it passes through the familiar scoured riverbed, that it does not flow into dark uncontrolled corners and that it will turn up again in the usual form where we expect it.

If we wish to pin out significant merit of cognitive approaches, which have developed in social research methodology since the 1980s,[1] we have to state, in particular, that because attention was focused to the thought processes of respondents, this has actually opened up access to this underground maze and has brought to light the entire process of information acquisition from respondents. Also thanks to this change in focus, it is clear today that it far from appropriate in respect of the complexity of the entire situation to perceive interviewing (even if standardised) simply as a sequence of questions and responses within a managed interview.

The dual concept of the interviewing situation by Sudman, Schwarz and Bradburn [1996: 1, 55, Schaeffer and Maynard 1996: 66 to 68] captures the entire situation in a much pertinent manner. In this concept, research is a series of cognitive tasks of respondents on the one part, and it is a social meeting on the other part. In addition to individual aspects, it also has interactive side and in studying this part, we have to take account of both the progress and the

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[1] Publications of main representatives of this movement, including: Sudman, Schwarz and Bradburn [1996], Sirken et al. [1996], Tourangeau, Rips and Rasinski [2000] or Bradburn, Sudman and Wansink [2004] may be useful to examine cognitive approaches more closely.

functioning of cognitive processes in the course of information processing by individuals as well as principles on which everyday communication and interaction of two or more persons are based. The best concept, therefore, in the opinion of these authors, is "…to consider interview within research to be a continuous conversation in which respondents perform their task of thinking and responding to questions in a specified social and conversational context." [Sudman, Schwarz and Bradburn 1996: 55]

Interview as a Social Meeting

The idea of ideal standardisation of an interview when both participants actually do and say what the rules determine and allow (and only that), is highly unrealistic, as reports from the field as well as results of laboratory experiments show [Fowler and Cannell 1996]. It is clear that neither party of the interaction is capable to meet the requirements prescribed from the "research table" in every detail, that the situation of their meeting simply cannot be curtailed into a completely formal, depersonalised shape of "managed standardised interview" inert in face of external as well as internal effects. Both parties simply have to abide by at least certain generally applicable and shared rules of social interaction and communication because if they did not do so, they would necessarily prove to be dogmatists, thickheads or at least individuals with no manners.

An example of standards followed by participants in a conversation commonly (although for the most part entirely unconsciously) includes implied assumptions of common conversation systematically analysed by Paul Grice, language philosopher [1975, Sternberg 2002: 367 to 369]. In his opinion, conversation follows, above all, the principle of co-operation and the principle can be expressed by four maxims (taken from [Sudman, Schwarz and Bradburn 1996: 62 to 64]): (1) The quality maxim prohibits the speaker to communicate whatever he/she considers untrue or unproven. (2) The continuity maxim orders the speaker to contribute to the conversation with a contribution relevant in respect of the intention of the conversation. (3) The quantity maxim requires the speaker to provide exactly as much information as required of him/her and (4) The style maxim requires the speaker to present a clear contribution, free of ambiguities, not wordy or incomprehensible. In other words, requirements of truthfulness, continuity (relevance), informativeness and clarity are posed on the speaker.

In the opinion of the above authors, such communication background has highly important implications for social research. Many of the seemingly incomprehensible misunderstandings and errors, which respondents commit when deriving the meaning of a question and, subsequently, when formulating/selecting their answers, clear out significantly if we understand what implicit requirements respondents follow in the course of an interview with interviewers. A critical situation when the respondents completely fail to understand the question (they do not know what the interviewer asks them, what type of answer is requested of them) and when they try to derive the meaning thereof may serve as an example. Because respondents do not anticipate that the interviewer (subsequently, the researcher) would interfere with the shared principles of conversation and, therefore, the question must have a meaning available to them; they try to uncover it using all possible means available to them, in particular monitoring the context and possible answers. And

it needs not be stressed too much, obviously, that in most cases, they succeed in doing so...

Another example which the authors mention in the general plan, comes from the third maxim which includes a requirement not to mention information which the recipient already knows. Based on this unwritten rule, respondents evaluate responses to questions in the light of their previous responses and instead of accepting as realistic the idea that the interviewer indeed asks them a similar or at least partially repetitive information, they use all efforts to "disclose" an interpretation of the issue, which better meets the rule of informativeness, i.e. not to repeat information already disclosed and bring something new. The fact that respondents find another interpretation of a question than that suggested by the researcher without any trace of conflict or hesitation is again relatively obvious.

Although, on the one side, an interview within a research abides by certain rules of common conversations, it nonetheless differs from them in a principal manner at the same time. For example, deducing the meaning of a question occurs here in highly restricted circumstances. While in a spontaneous conversation, it is possible to rely on common ground of interview shared by participants in the form of knowledge, conviction and attitudes and on grounding in respect of correct understanding of the question or statement which they usually receive from their partners in various manners, in a research interview, these aids may be relied upon only very rarely (for details on differences between common conversation and standardised interview as a part of a research, see Schober [1999: 78 to 84]. Not only need not the interviewer have any common grounds in the form of knowledge, experience and attitudes etc. with the respondent (oftentimes, the respondent does not even know the meaning or objective of the research, which the interviewer brings to the respondent), moreover, there is not even reassurance as to correct understanding of the meaning of a question, since, usually, the interviewer tends to be explicitly prevented from any deviation from the prescribed scenario or even from providing explanations. How ambivalent and unpleasant such situation is for the interviewers has been again shown both by experience with their fieldwork as well as by experiments focused on examining their performance in laboratory conditions [Schaeffer and Maynard 1996: 71 to 82]. Conclusions implied by these experiments show that "...errors of interviewers do not reflect lack of knowledge of techniques or neglect but rather they are attempts at compensating bad questions." [Fowler and Cannell 1996: 20]

Interview as a Series of Cognitive Tasks

Analytical concept of the process of posing and answering questions obviously follows from general models of information processing, developed within cognitive psychology [Lachman, Lachman and Butterfied 1979, Hippler, Schwarz and Sudman 1987] and such concepts can be presented at various levels of detail. One of the four-tier model alternatives, dividing the entire process to the phases of interpreting the question, retrieval of information from memory, decision-making and adjusting the response to the possibilities offered [Tourangeau 1984, Schaeffer and Maynard 1996: 65, Sudman, Schwarz and Bradburn 1996: 15, 18] tends to used most widely. Each of these phases, however, can be further individually elaborated into more detailed sequences as well as into a set of related circumstances and conditions: e.g. the phase of

interpretation may be divided into understanding words, understanding the question, deriving the meaning of the question etc. and all these sub-processes involve a number of circumstances such as the context of the question, offered responses, response to the previous question etc. Majority of the above processes also occur differently in various situations, in particular, they differ for questions requiring an opinion to be voiced, versus questions which require retrieval of relevant memories. In addition to this, the sequence of the above phases is not one hundred percent either. It is possible that some of the phases run at least partially in parallel, or that respondents go back to previous phases before concluding the entire process or, to the contrary, skip certain phases. [Sudman, Schwarz and Bradburn 1996: 77]

Originally a simple scheme may therefore be elaborated to great detail, an example of which can be the model on which Sudman, Schwarz and Bradburn [1996] rely in Chapter 3 of their summary study.

What does a respondent need to do according to this model if he/she wishes to respond to the question posed to the best of his/her knowledge and conscience? What circumstances enter the play and affect its result? The series of tasks and the different circumstances are clearly very extensive, although at first sight the matter is simple (and done away with in the course of a few seconds). Let us take a model example of a question which is usually presented in public opinion research: "Are you satisfied with your life?" with the following alternative responses: "Very satisfied – Quite satisfied – Quite dissatisfied – Very dissatisfied." It is a very short and simple attitudinal question. Despite that, the number of tasks faced by me as a respondent if I wish to respond to this question is perhaps surprising.

First of all, I have to be able to perceive the continuous airflow and articulate it into individual words. I should also know the grammar of the language to discern that this is a question and, based on the sentence structure, to derive the function of the words in a sentence. Further, it is necessary to understand all these words. I have to know the usual meaning of the expression "be satisfied with something" and I have to be able to discern it, for example, from equivalent evaluations such as "be enthusiastic about", be "dissatisfied" etc. I have to have a certain idea as to what my life is. Since this image takes on various forms in various contexts ("my life so far", "my current life situation", "my life at the side of my spouse", "my life in a small town" etc.), I have to derive its current meaning somehow. Obviously, I will take account of the context in which the question appears (provided that we would be discussing the topic of matrimony and family life with the interviewer at that moment, I would have half the battle), and my previous responses (in light of what I have already said that I have had a relatively happy childhood and that I am an optimist as far as future outlooks are concerned, it is most likely that I have to assess my current life situation…). In addition to that, I have to understand the whole statement and find out whether I am asked as to the existence of satisfaction ("Whether…") or as to the level ("How…"). The most suitable help at that moment will undoubtedly consist in the prompted responses, offered to me by the interviewer. If the interviewer wished to hear only "Yes" or "No", then he/she would be asking about the condition, if, however, he/she offers also the "Very…" and "Quite…" alternatives, I will probably have to asses the level.

If the understanding of the meaning of the question is sufficient for me, I can attempt searching all relevant information corresponding to the current interpretation – i.e. that they are actually enquiring as to how I am right now. Thus, I may recall that I dropped my keys into the sewerage in front of our

house yesterday, that my son won the county poetry reading competition at the weekend, that the tooth which ached just a couple days ago, has made up its mind for a while, that it looked like a cloudy day in the morning but now, the sun starts to pop up, that there are three hours left until the end of work, but that I will have to make up for the time spent on this interview etc.

At the moment when I have the feeling that I have enough relevant memories or that I have devoted enough time to this question (well, we are just one third through the questionnaire, it seems!), I can try to reach a summary conclusion. Through this, I find that on the whole, positive things prevail and I should be rather fine...well but the keys yesterday...that really made me angry! And, moreover, I will have to have them made anew, all of them...well, on the other hand, the locksmiths is right across the street... Well, "on the whole, I am fine, I guess."

Unfortunately, this response does not satisfy the interviewer at all and he insists upon me selecting from the options offered. The only possibility therefore is to clarify the responses offered, give them a meaning in a similar manner as I have done for the text of the question. Definitely, I will first try to imagine the limit points of the scale offered: I would be very satisfied if the keys did not fall into the sewerage and if I was not afraid that the tooth will again make itself heard. I would be very dissatisfied, on the other hand, if the tooth still ached and the locksmiths were be at the other end of the city. I have to decide, therefore, between the not clearly cut alternatives. This is difficult... What have I entered for the past question? If I am not mistaken, I put "tend to be optimistic"? Well, that means I am doing quite well now, then! ... well, hm... I am "quite satisfied"!

What is most important concerning the described process is the fact that none of these events get registered by the interviewer and, therefore, the researcher does not know a thing about them. The manner in which respondents construe individual words, the entire question as well as possible responses, facts that he/she takes account of, keys it uses in the course of the decision-making ... all happens in the course of several seconds in his/her head and the interviewer gets to know only the result. Despite of all this, it is clear that all above activities and circumstances affect the result in one way or another and they should therefore not be left unnoticed. (Detailed analysis of tasks of respondent and circumstances affecting the process of information processing is included in Sudman, Schwarz and Bradburn [1996: 55 to 79].)

Conclusions possible to be made on the basis of the described model are obvious. Researchers should leave the behaviourist image of conversation between the interviewer and respondent as a series of impulses having the form of questions and reactions having the form of responses. Deviations of the actual behaviour of both participants in the interaction from the prescribed standardised form should be taken account of at least during construction of individual questions and questionnaires and when interpreting data acquired. In this respect, the cognitive approach makes a very suitable instrument.

Methodology considerations of the essence of information acquisition should, however, reach much deeper. Is it indeed effective to prescribe respondents and interviewers their roles and possibilities in such a strict manner as has been common so far? Does not an environment of maximum standardisation intended as an important means for data quality increase (especially in view of their validity and reliability) create a kind of uncontrolled distortion decreasing, on the other hand, the data quality in another manner? If the respondent does not get assurance that he/she understood the question

correctly and unless the interviewer receives a signal that the respondent understood the question correctly, how could we as researchers expect that everybody indeed responds to what we intended to ask them and that everybody comments on the same issue? As Groves [1996] asks at the head of a contribution with a pertinent title: How Do We Know What We Think They (respondents) Think Is Really What They Think?

In the outlined situation, it is clearly not inappropriate to consider the possibility to reduce the level of directivity of the rules for managing interviews between interviewers and respondents. Clearly, an attempt would be worth the while to offer a bit looser field of action to both parties, to allow them to meet adequately at least some of the requirements of cognitive information processing as well as some of the rules of conversation flow. To loosen up the imaginary leash and still keep a tight rein, however, will be a demanding task. Finding an optimum borderline between a strictly standardised form of managed interview and loose conversation and training interviewers in their new role will not be easy either. But undoubtedly, researchers, in their never-ending effort to improve the quality of their own research, need to address both issues at standing at prominent places.

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