

The Conduct of the Survey Interview: Models and Protocols

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Abstract

This paper analyzes and compares three models of survey interviewing. That is, models of the conduct of survey interviewing, rather than models of the structure of questionnaires, interviews, etc.

The first is the Laboratory Model, which is motivated by a desire to mimic the experimental physical sciences, paradigmatically physics. The paradigmatic example of this sort of model is the “Standardized Survey Interview”. Analysis of this model exposes a variety of (usually) unacknowledged commitments to theoretical/philosophical doctrines, which are shown to be untenable.

The second model is the Extended Laboratory Model. This is a modification of the Laboratory Model. It acknowledges that, due to the interactive nature of the interview, the interviewer inevitably makes a contribution. But it retains the basic structural commitments of the laboratory Model. An example of an Extended Laboratory model is Maynard et al’s “alternating model”.

The third model is The Theatrical Model. This model is similar to the Laboratory Model, in that it recommends that the interviewer read the questions exactly as written, avoid probes, etc., but it involves a very different conceptualization of the nature of interviewing. Like the Extended Laboratory Model, it acknowledges that the Field Interviewer makes a substantial contribution to the survey interview, due to the fundamentally interactive and collaborative nature of discursive practice. But it stresses that interviewing essentially involves role-playing. This may or may not result in interviewer behavior that is different from what it would be under the Extended Laboratory Model, but either way it would suggest different approaches to interviewer training. This model is based on a more realistic picture of the nature of surveys and survey interviewing as traditionally practiced, but it also has some weaknesses, which we analyze.

Finally, the fourth model is The Collaborative Model. This model is driven by a closer and more realistic analysis of the nature of the survey interview. It demystifies aspects of the interview that the other two models take for granted or ignore, such as the various asymmetries involved in interviews, the fact that completion of a survey questionnaire is the joint responsibility of the interviewer and the respondent, and so forth. It discards the fictions that are at the core of the other models discussed. Most critically, motivated by considerations of the nature of discursive practice and the production of meaning, it denies that survey interviewing involves measurement. In summary, this model recommends that survey interviewing be construed as collaborative or joint action, and that the demystified facts of the matter be openly acknowledged in the conduct of interviews. This means, among other things, that the field interviewer should serve as an assistant to the respondent, rather than a proxy for the researcher; that interviewer and respondent are jointly responsible for completing the questionnaire; and that the results of individual survey interviews

should be viewed as a trace a kind of dialog between the individuality of the particular respondent and the stereotype presupposed by the questionnaire design.

Contents

1 The Laboratory Model	3
1.1 Critique	3
2 The Extended Laboratory Model	5
3 The Theatrical Model	5
3.1 Critique	5
4 The Collaborative Model	5
Appendices	7
A Bibliography	7

List of Figures

1 The Laboratory Model

Remark 1 *TODO: the legitimacy of this model is based on theoretical (philosophical) commitments that are usually accepted uncritically (since they are virtually never explicitly even acknowledged). The organization of this section thus should be: describe the model using Standardized Interviewing as the paradigm; show that it is motivated by a felt need to mimic experimental physical science; show how adoption of this model implicitly entails commitment to various theoretical/philosophical doctrines (theories, dogmas) as models of various aspects of the Survey Interview; critique the adequacy of these implicit underlying doctrines as models of interviewing.*

The Laboratory Model is driven by the desire to mimic the techniques and methods of the physical sciences, paradigmatically physics. It is implicitly committed to the following presuppositions:

- Questions are instruments of measurement
- The Field Interview is a laboratory technician
- The Respondent is a laboratory sample
- etc.

The Standardized Survey Interview is the paradigmatic example of this sort of model. The presuppositions listed above are implemented in the basic recommendations of this model:

- Read the question exactly as worded
- Do not probe
- etc.

1.1 Critique

There are many problems with this model, some of which have been explored by researchers focussing on the interactive nature of the interview.

First, this model idealizes the FI as a kind of robot; ideally, FIs are interchangeable parts. Of course even those researchers most committed to this model acknowledge that it is impossible to attain this ideal in practice. The critical question is whether it is even desirable (rational) to adopt this model as an ideal. It is not only unrealistic as a practical matter; even theoretically, this model is badly motivated.

Second, under this model the ideal FI makes no contribution to the interview; all the work is done by the text of the question and the Respondent. Not only are FIs not robots, the notion that one human being can ask a question of another human being without making a substantial contribution to the exchange is clearly false. Even if we could construct interviewing robots, the dynamics of asking and answering questions would require

A more formal way of stating this point is to observe that the ideal is based on an implicit premise of independence. The idea, clearly drawn from experimental physical sciences, is that the actions of the experimenter merely serve to trigger the causal chain the results in the experimental outcome, which is independent of the “quality” of the experimenter’s actions. In other words, the ideal is that the actions of experimenter should not be genuine *actions* at all; rather, they should be steps in an *effective procedure*, and an effective procedure is one that can be performed by a mindless robot.

Remark 2 *Note the connection between scientific experimental method and the concept of “effective procedure”. The latter is the fundamental concept of computation; it only arose in the late 19th century in a strictly mathematical context, and was given definitive explicit meaning by Turing in 1936. But experimental method implicitly involved a notion of effective procedure long before this notion emerged explicitly in mathematics.*

The SSIM adopts this perspective with respect to the interview, and thus presupposes that the asking and answering of questions are independent actions. But this is clearly not the case, even in the ideal situation.

Remark 3 *TODO: trace this to underlying philosophical commitments. In the case of SSIM, the underlying commitment is to semantic atomism [check terminology -GR]. In other words, once the researcher decides that the interview should be modeled on the physical experiment, it remains to justify this, to show that it is a “good” model for survey interviewing. The major philosophical (theoretical) resources available to support this model are: semantic atomism, the telementation model of communication, etc.*

Third, this model fails to recognize that rules are not sufficient; in order to successfully “administer” an interview, the FI must cope with the specific circumstances of particular interviewing situations, and must decide in each case exactly how to apply the rules of the SSIM. By now it is well known both theoretically (Wittgenstein et al.) and empirically (Ethnomethodology, Conversation Analysis) that rules are not enough; to apply a rule, individuals inevitably must improvise in order to accommodate local contingencies. Researchers in Survey Research [TODO: citations] have studied in some detail how FIs do this in actual interviews even when they attempt to follow the rules of SSIM. Such empirical research has clearly shown what theoretical considerations also demonstrate, namely the the SSIM idealization of the FI is a bad model.

Fourth, and perhaps most important (and most problematic), this model presupposes that questions and questionnaires are instruments of measurement, and that asking a question and obtaining an answer amounts to taking a measurement.

Remark 4 *TODO: flesh this out. A detailed analysis of the notion of questions as measurements is beyond the scope of this paper, but we need to say something at least about what sort of implicit theoretical doctrines are implicated by this idea, and why they fail.*

2 The Extended Laboratory Model

3 The Theatrical Model

The theatrical model adopts some of the rules of the SSIM, but discards the idealized laboratory model of interviewing. It acknowledges that the FI inevitably makes a substantial contribution to the interview. Instead of modeling the FI on an idealized laboratory technician or apparatus, it relies on the analogy between an FI reading a question to a Respondent and the performance of an actor before an audience. The questionnaire (written by the Researcher) is analogous to a script; the FI's job is play the role defined by the script, just like an actor on stage.

Instead of "read the question exactly as worded", the instruction to the FI is the director's plea: stay on script. Do not ad lib.

This model acknowledges that the script alone is not sufficient to the performance. Like an a playscript, a questionnaire can only come to life in the hands of a performer, whose work cannot be antecedently specified in full. Good theatrical directors know better than to try to tell an actor precisely *how* to deliver a line; figuring that out is the responsibility of the actor and only the actor. Paradoxically, good acting always involves a substantial element of spontaneity, even where the performance is tightly scripted. Replace the actor's spontaneity by the director's procedure and you kill the performance.

The same goes for survey interviewing.

Remark 5 *An important element of this model is the observation that, at least in many cases, the FI effectively acts as the Researcher's mouthpiece. The FI seems to ask questions, but this is an illusion (just like a stage play); in fact, it is not the FI asking the question, it is the Researcher. And the both the FI and Respondent know this. At best the FI may be said to ask questions on behalf of the Researcher; at worst, the FI cannot be said to be genuinely asking questions at all, any more than a Hamlet can be said to genuinely die at the end of the play.*

Remark 6 *TODO: flesh out the model and critique it. What are the underlying commitments? What about measurement?*

3.1 Critique

4 The Collaborative Model

This model may be thought of as a kind of de-mystified model of the interview. Unlike the theatrical model, this model asks the FI and R to explicitly acknowledge the various fictions and positionings involved in a survey interview and go from there.

The role of the FI in this model is neither to merely execute an effective procedure (as in the SSIM), nor to play a role in a semi-fictional drama, as in the theatrical model. Instead, the FI is asked to collaborate with the Respondent in order to complete the questionnaire.

Remark 7 *The main recommendation for this model is that it is based on a more realistic assessment of the nature of survey interviews.*

This model explicitly acknowledges:

- The FI asks questions on behalf of a Researcher
- Questions are “recipient designed” (Bakhtin), but the recipient is a stereotype: the Ideal Respondent
- The survey interview is asymmetric (epistemic, power, control of flow, stereotypical v. actual respondent etc.)
- Questions and answers are discursive moves in the “space of reasons”
- Both FI and Respondent must improvise (in CA-speak, “produce local order” etc.)
- No measurement (properly so-called) is involved
- Completion of the interview (questionnaire) is the joint responsibility of both the FI and the Respondent.

Remark 8 *“Stereotype design” - in constructing the questionnaire, the Respondent inevitably must have some idea of who the respondent(s) might be. This is not (pace Houtkoop-Steenstra) a matter of “audience” design as opposed to “recipient” design; audiences do not answer questions. The relevant distinction is between design for a particular (specific individual respondent) v. design for the general (idealized or “(stereo-) typical” member of the research population); hence “stereotype design”. [NB: Putnam on concepts as stereotypes, Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’”]*

This has rarely (never to my knowledge) been recognized, but it has major implications. It means that the whole show is biased from the very beginning by the Researcher’s notion of what counts as a stereotypical member of the research population. And again, this source of bias is never (to my knowledge) explicitly addressed. But the stereotype, since it drives the design of the questionnaire, should itself be an antecedent topic of research.

Alternatively, the survey can itself be viewed as an investigation into the character of the stereotypic member. The “errors” should be viewed not as errors, but as variations that may motivate a revision of the stereotype.

Remark 9 *Thus one of the major tasks of the respondent is just to negotiate some kind of a detente with the stereotype that is implicitly encoded in the questionnaire design. So we have a kind of dialectic between the particular, situated individual respondent on the one hand, and the general, free-floating, unmoored stereotype assumed and projected by the questionnaire (and the interview.)*

Appendices

A Bibliography

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