

Back to Likert
Towards the conversational survey
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ABSTRACT

For decades, the dilemma between open-ended and closed-ended response alternatives occupied the methodological debate. Over the years, dominant approaches in survey have reacted to this dilemma by opting for fixed response alternatives and the standardization of interviewer's behaviour. If this methodological decision has been the survey's fortune, making it the methodology most widely used in the social sciences, however it produces a large amount of biases well known in the literature. In order to remedy these biases an alternative proposal can be designed by re-discovering and adapting two "old" proposals: Likert's technique called "fixed question/free answers", and Galtung's procedure named "open question/closed answer". Both procedures are guided by the same principle: make the interview into a conversation, let the interviewee answer freely in his/her own words, and thus release him/her from the researcher's schemes.

Bio-note

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1. RESCUE THE SURVEY

For decades, the dilemma between open-ended and closed-ended response alternatives preoccupied the methodological debate (Schuman and Presser 1979). But like all dilemmas it found no solution, for “the closed questions did not capture the same dimensions of meaning that (are) revealed by the open question” (Groves, Fultz and Martin 1992, 60).

Over the years, the survey has resolved the dilemma by opting for the second alternative. In fact, questionnaires generally comprise few questions with open-ended response alternatives. This choice has been determined by various factors which, in certain respects, have been the survey’s fortune, making it the methodology most widely used in the social sciences, and also giving it great currency in the academic and scientific world.

Nevertheless in the long run this methodological choice has also depleted the survey’s appeal. Indeed, numerous researchers have both criticised and abandoned the method. Whilst in the 1950s a brilliant future was predicted for the survey, in recent times (at least in the academic world) it has suffered a crisis of identity and entered slow but inexorable decline. The postmodern wave and the rise of qualitative methods since the 1990s have dimmed the image of the survey, both in academe and public opinion. This tendency seems to have affected the younger generation of social scientists as well. A study by Payne, Williams and Chamberlain (2004) on 244 full-scale papers published in four leading British general sociology journals (*Sociology*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *Sociological Review* and

Sociological Research Online) between 1999 and 2000 found that 41% of them were based on qualitative research methods and only 14% on quantitative ones. In addition, the qualitative studies had been conducted mainly by junior staff, which shows that qualitative research involves a generation issue.

The survey has also lost favour with public opinion, and it is often ridiculed or considered a highly superficial tool with which to interpret social phenomena. Although the survey is still the methodology most widely used in social and market research (for instance, the spread of customer satisfaction policy has inundated the users of numerous services, from hospitals to museums, with questionnaires), its progressive loss of prestige has been evident for some time.

The survey now finds itself at a crossroads: either it must reverse its decline by renewing itself (in its data-collection practices and in how it relates to respondents) or it is bound to suffer severe setbacks.

I believe that the survey still has enormous potential; it can be definitively emancipated from its positivist origins; and it can regain the image and the prestige that it enjoyed at its beginnings, in what we call its 'golden age'.

2. THE OLD DILEMMA

It has been said, for decades that one of the central issues in the methodological debate was the dilemma between open-ended and closed-ended response alternatives.

The origins of the debate date back to before the Second World War. However, it culminated in the mid-1940s when conflict erupted between two opposing factions: the *Division of Polls* headed by Elmo C. Wilson and the *Division of Program Surveys* headed by Rensis Likert (1903-1981), both of which were research divisions of the *US Bureau of Intelligence*, then directed by Keith R. Kane (see Converse 1987, 195-201). In the spring of 1942 Kane asked Paul F. Lazarsfeld (1901–1976), a

methodologist of Austrian origin, to examine the controversy and to find a methodological solution for it. Lazarsfeld's famous article of 1944 (*The Controversy over Detailed Interviews - An Offer for Negotiation*) was a re-working of the report that he submitted to Kane in 1942.

Besides personal issues, the conflict between Wilson and Likert was provoked by the different research techniques employed in the two divisions. The interviewers used by Wilson's *Division of Polls*, for example, asked respondents to choose one of the fixed response alternatives – as still prescribed by research handbooks today.¹ Instead, the interviewers who worked for Likert were instructed first to transcribe the interviewee's comments and then (on conclusion of the interview) to choose the response alternative which they considered to be the closest match with the interviewee's comment. Hence in the former case it was the interviewee who directly chose the answer; in the later it was instead the interviewer who chose the answer, doing so on the interviewee's behalf.

Although this last procedure was not proof against distortions (principal among which were misunderstandings of the interviewee's opinions), it nevertheless made it possible to avoid numerous other distortions that might arise during the interview, which according to Likert should as closely as possible resemble a conversation. This manner of administering questionnaires thus came to be baptized the "fixed question/free answers" technique.

Likert was aware that if the interviewer was to perform these tasks correctly, s/he had to be adequately trained in both how to conduct the probes and how to understand the meanings of the interviewees' statements.

¹ Galtung points out a terminological imprecision which had been circulating for decades at the time and is still current today: "the response variable is spelt out for the respondent, so that all he has to do is to choose the value that comes closest to his response. This is the 'closed question', a misnomer since it is really a 'closed answer' (1967, 119).

Accordingly, in 1942 Likert asked the psychologist Carl Rogers (1902-1987), known at the time for his use of 'nondirective' techniques² in psychotherapy sessions, to train interviewers in how to communicate with their interviewees and how to understand their emotions and reactions. The members of Likert's staff (in particular Charles F. Cannell and Victor C. Raimy) learned from Rogers how to formulate interviewee-centred probes and how to use pauses and silences as communication devices.

The researchers at the *Division of Program Surveys* also paid close attention to the procedures for codifying the narrative materials collected by open-ended questions. But they soon discovered the long-drawn-out and laborious nature of these procedures. Obviously, the criterion adopted by Likert required more time and money than did the criterion used by Wilson.

3. THE OUTCOME

In the decades which followed, the debate extended to all the social sciences, and at times it grew heated. Still today, there are those who believe that fixed response alternatives have considerable advantages. One of them is their greater rapidity of administration, classification and interpretation, contrary to open-ended ones, which are easy to set but difficult to examine (Oppenheim 1966, 41). Moreover, a series of pre-determined answers can help the interviewee understand the meaning of the question (Selltiz and Jahoda, 1963, 262), thereby reducing the rate of answers irrelevant to the purposes of the research (Bailey 1978, 105). They can prompt interviewees to recall events that they would otherwise not remember (Schwarz and Hippler 1987). And they can be used to address sensitive topics like

² Rogers originally called his approach "non-directive therapy" but later replaced the term "non-directive" with the term "client-centred" and then later used the term "person-centred".

age, income, political preferences, etc., which would receive higher refusal rates if investigated with open-ended questions.

Other scholars object that open-ended answers are much more valid than fixed-response alternatives, which force interviewees to think in the same way as the researcher. Answers with pre-established categories suggest the answer to respondents who in fact have no opinion on the matter (Selltiz and Jahoda 1963, 261; Converse 1964; 1970; Noelle-Neumann 1970, 193).

In an attempt to mediate between the opposing factions, Lazarsfeld (1944) pointed out that the appropriateness of open-ended or closed-ended response alternatives depended on a certain number of circumstantial factors (aim of the interview, the interviewee's knowledge of the topic, degree of structuring in his/her opinions and attitudes, willingness to talk about the topic, ability to communicate, and, of course, the researcher's knowledge of these circumstantial factors). However, it is doubtful whether the decision to choose one of the two types of questions is ever actually taken after careful consideration of these factors.

In the same article, Lazarsfeld examined the results of two surveys on the attitude of Californians towards Japanese residents in California after the bombing of Pearl Harbour. The survey conducted by Likert used open-ended questions; the one by Wilson used closed-ended ones. Lazarsfeld reported that the two studies obtained substantially identical results, although Likert's group had not fully exploited the richness of the materials collected. Lazarsfeld therefore advocated cooperation between the two groups: open-ended questions would be useful at the beginning of the research as a pre-test (that is, to construct the questions for the questionnaire and check their operation) and, at the end of the same survey, to re-interview a subsample in order to contextualize the percentages obtained. Wilson's group would instead conduct the survey proper.

Likert forcefully opposed Lazarsfeld's proposal. As a consequence of his opposition, in November 1942 the Office of War Information, for which both groups worked, discontinued the funding for Likert's group (which continued to work for the Dept. of Agriculture until 1946). On conclusion of the war, various authoritative researchers – for instance Merton, Fiske and Curtis (1946), Campbell (1945; 1946), Cartwright, Stouffer – began to adopt Lazarsfeld's compromise procedure. But the practice of using open-ended questions before and after interviews conducted with closed-ended questions gradually fell into disuse because it was found to be too cumbersome.

We know very well how things turned out: Wilson's standardized model prevailed, and contemporary practices of questionnaire administration consist in having the interviewee choose an answer from a range of fixed response alternatives. This technique is certainly easier, but it produces numerous biases well known in the literature. The principal ones are these:

1. *misunderstanding of the response alternatives* by the interviewees: **the existence of equal intervals between scale points has been questioned and criticised by Jordan (1965), Galtung (1967), Marradi (1980-81), and Pawson (1982) because often respondents do not perceive as equal the intervals among response alternatives or scale points. This cognitive phenomenon has also been demonstrated by Amisano and Rinaldi (1988) and Gobo (1997);**
2. *the multiple word meanings of response alternatives* due the communicative functions of quantifiers: **respondents interpret in different ways and attribute *different* meanings to the *same* response alternatives as, for example, 'always', 'very often', 'often', 'never' (Simpson 1944, Hakel 1968). This phenomenon undermines the unidimensionality of the scale, the basis of comparability among respondents' responses and, in a broad sense, the validity of research results** (Goocher 1965, 1969; Moser and Kalton 1971; Pepper 1981;

- Hörmann 1983; Newstead and Pollard 1984; Groves 1987, 1989; Bradburn and Miles 1989; Moxey 1990, Schaeffer 1991; Pitrone 1995; Moxey and Sanford 1992, Gobo 1997, 2006);
3. *the invented opinions* (or lies) phenomenon: fixed formats lead respondents to select an answer-opinion even if they do not have any opinions (Hartley 1946; Ferber 1956; Selltitz and Jahoda 1963; Converse 1964, 1970; Noelle-Neumann 1970; Schuman and Presser 1981; Schuman and Presser 1983; Schuman and Scott 1987);
 4. *the influence of the response alternatives* on formation of the judgement: response alternatives are far from being a passive instrument collecting respondent's behaviour, attitudes or opinions only, because response alternatives play an "informative function", affecting both respondent's attitudes and recall processes (Schwarz and Hippler 1987; Clark and Shober, 1992; Schwarz 1999);
 5. *social desirability* effects (Kahn and Cannell 1957; Cronbach 1950; Crowne and Marlowe 1960; Dohrenwend 1966; Oppenheim 1966; Hochstim 1967; Sudman 1967; Phillips and Clancy 1972; Sudman and Bradburn 1973; Blair, Sudman, Bradburn and Stocking 1977; Stefanowska 1979; Bradburn, Sudman and Blair 1979; Schwartz 2000);
 6. *the yea-saying* and *response set* phenomena: fixed formats lead respondents to select always the same response alternatives (Lentz 1938; Cronbach 1946, 1950; Gage, Leavitt, and Stone 1957; Couch and Keniston 1960; Keniston 1960; Oppenheim 1966; Hamilton 1968; McKennell 1974; Oskamp 1977; Fisher, Weiss and Davis 1968; Bailey 1978; Moun 1988).

These are not biases of marginal importance. Indeed, at times their effect can be devastating (see Gobo 2006, 286-7, tab. 2). And researchers sincerely concerned

with the quality of their data must necessarily seek remedies and try solutions able to reduce these biases.

4. BACK TO LIKERT

As we know, Likert lost the contest and his procedure fell into disuse. Nevertheless, a few decades later, the Norwegian methodologist Johan Galtung (1967, 120) reprised Likert's ideas and devised a variant of his procedure which he called "open question/closed answer".³ Although this was apparently the reverse of Likert's "fixed question/ free answers" technique, in fact both procedures were guided by the same principle: make the interview into a conversation, let the interviewee answer freely in his/her own words, and thus release him/her from the researcher's schemes. Galtung describes it thus:

"for interviews, a distinction can be made between closed questions and closed answers. In the former, the respondent is given, orally, the answer alternatives: 'Which candidate do you favor, Allende, Frei or Duràn?', which means that the response variable is spelt out for him as in the questionnaire. In the latter he is asked 'Which candidate do you favor?' The question is open, but *the interviewer may have closed the answers by a precoding in his schedule. This, however, is only known to him and not to the respondent*, and hence serves only administrative purposes like facilitation of coding. It does not structure the mind of the respondent" (Galtung 1967, 120, emphasis added).

³ When devising this procedure, Galtung was probably inspired by Bales' famous study (1951) in which he described an observational grid (consisting of a limited number of actions very similar to the responses alternatives of a questionnaire) for use by researchers to conduct systematic observation of the interaction between students and teachers.

However, Galtung did not push his proposal, and he seemed unaware of its potential to revolutionize the survey by making it much more interviewee-centred. Perhaps the cultural and scientific climate of the time was not ready for a change of such magnitude, because the procedure envisaged by Galtung required the interviewer to 'close' the open-ended questions put to the interviewee by interpreting the latter's answers and comments. For traditionalists, this was a decidedly delicate and 'dangerous' operation. Nevertheless, it made Likert's technique more agile, less time-consuming, and economically less costly.

The procedure described by Galtung is instead of vital importance if we wish to exploit a questionnaire's potential to the full. In fact, a survey is valid if it uses a wholly exhaustive set of response alternatives: or in other words, if these alternatives cover all possible states relative to a variable; or the entire range of the answers which an interviewee can give to a question. Given that this is difficult to achieve, researchers have dealt with the difficulty by including the residual response alternative 'Other'. Their (wholly ideal-typical) representation of the interviewee's reasoning is as follows:

1. the interviewer asks a question
2. the interviewee thinks and forms an opinion or a judgment
3. s/he looks at (or listens to) the response alternatives
4. s/he fails to find one corresponding to his/her opinion
5. s/he chooses the residual response alternative 'Other', furnishing the interviewer with an opinion not comprised in the range of the closed answers.

However, the results of surveys show that the response alternative 'Other' is little used by interviewees; not because they are generally satisfied by the response alternatives available to them, but rather because they are cognitively lazy. Hence, if we want to use closed-ended questions, as is correct to do in a survey, we must construct questions with exhaustive response alternatives. But, since this is very

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difficult to do, the alternative is to give the interviewers the task of collecting interviewee opinions which do not fall within the range of answers.

Secondly, experimental research on surveys shows that interviewees follow, not this ideal-typical chain of reasoning, but an entirely different one:

1. the interviewer asks a question
2. the interviewee looks at (or listens to) the response alternatives available
3. s/he adapts his/her opinion to the response alternatives available, letting him/herself be influenced by them.

In other words the response scales are not simple and passive 'measurement instruments' used by interviewees to report their behaviours (Schwarz and Hippler 1987, 164), but active instruments which *construct* the opinions and behaviours of interviewees, who are induced by social desirability to seek the median behaviour in the response alternatives. This is why Galtung's procedure could remedy these two serious biases.

4.1 Beyond mixed methods

This procedure represents also a getting over the (important) issue of combining qualitative and quantitative methods – termed 'mixed methods' – which has recently come back into favour. This issue has led those approaches which succeed a separate use of different methodologies (survey, discursive interviews, focus groups, etc.) within the same research project. However, it appears to be costly and time-consuming.

Galtung's technique (which I rename 'conversational survey') is a valid alternative, given that many of the advantages of mixed methods are obtained using a single method. In other words, Galtung's technique combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches *in a single instrument*, in the wake of other

techniques (now widely used) like the 'delphi method' (Dalkey and Helmer, 1963) or the 'mystery shopper' (Gobo 2008, 318-9) which rely on this mixed approach.

4.2. An application

In the autumn of 2001 I directed a survey on a probability sample of 629 students enrolled at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Milan, where I currently teach. The sampling frame consisted of 7,115 students. The survey was carried out by means of telephone interviews conducted by 98 students attending my course on Social Research Methods (an average of 6 interviews per student). I constructed the questionnaire in class together with the students, and they invented all the fixed response alternatives. Moreover, they tested the questionnaire four times before drawing up the definitive version. They were therefore well acquainted with both the questions and the response alternatives.

It was an exceptional experience because it is rare for the researchers (those who construct the questionnaire), the interviewers, and the interviewees to share the same cultural and communicative code, as happened in this case because all of them had the same status: that of being students of political science.

Following Galtung's procedure, numerous questions were phrased with an open format as if they were open-ended questions. As the interviewee answered, the interviewer tried (*during* the telephone interview) to locate his/her answer within the pre-set range, which only the interviewer knew. If the answer could be placed within this range, the interviewer made a brief note which s/he then expanded on conclusion of the interview, inserting it in the residual response alternative 'Other'.

There follow some examples of questions available to the interviewer (because the interviewee was ignorant of the fixed response alternatives). The instructions for the interviewer are in brackets:

3) How do you travel to university? (*FREE ANSWER: ALSO*)

INDICATE SEVERAL MEANS OF TRANSPORT)

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| 1. On foot | 0 |
| 2. By bicycle | 0 |
| 3. By scooter or motorbike | 0 |
| 4. By car | 0 |
| 5. By tram/bus/trolley bus | 0 |
| 6. By coach | 0 |
| 7. By underground | 0 |
| 8. By train | 0 |
| 9. Other | 0 |

6) Who advised you to choose the Faculty of Political Science? (FREE ANSWER BUT REPORT THE MAIN SOURCE OF INFLUENCE)
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- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1. No-one, I chose it myself | 0 |
| 2. Parents | 0 |
| 3. Brothers/Sisters | 0 |
| 4. Relatives | 0 |
| 5. Friends/Classmates | 0 |
| 6. Teachers at high school | 0 |
| 7. Acquaintances | 0 |
| 8. Employers and work colleagues | 0 |
| 9. Graduates in Political Science | 0 |
| <hr/> | |
| 10. Career counsellors | 0 |
| 11. The Faculty Guide | 0 |
| 12. Newspaper articles | 0 |
| 13. TV | 0 |
| 14. Aptitude test | 0 |
| <hr/> | |
| 15. Other | 0 |
| 98. Doesn't know/Can't remember | 0 |

18) What are your main difficulties with the course <u>content</u> , i.e. what is taught? (FREE ANSWER. BUT MARK ONLY THE 2 MAIN DIFFICULTIES)

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. No problems | 0 |
| 2. Lacks the <u>basic knowledge</u> to understand the course content | 0 |
| 3. The lectures are <u>difficult</u> | 0 |
| 4. The lectures are <u>unclear</u> | 0 |
| 5. The lecturers explain <u>too quickly</u> | 0 |
| 6. <u>Mismatch</u> between the content of lectures and exams | 0 |
| 7. The <u>syllabuses</u> are too wide-ranging | 0 |
| 8. The <u>syllabuses</u> are out of date | 0 |
| 9. The <u>teaching aids</u> are inadequate | 0 |

- (course hand-outs) 0
- 10. The teaching technologies are inadequate (OHPs, video recorders etc.) 0
- 11. The set texts are difficult 0
- 12. Other 0
- 98. Doesn't know 0

19) What, in order of importance, are your three main difficulties with your degree course as a whole?
 (FREE ANSWER. BUT WRITE THE NUMBER NEXT TO THE ITEM INDICATED BY THE INTERVIEWEE)

- | | |
|--|----------------------|
| 1. No difficulties | <input type="text"/> |
| 2. Difficulties with the <u>lecturers</u> | <input type="text"/> |
| 3. Difficulties with the <u>other students</u> on the course | <input type="text"/> |
| 4. Study load (excessively <u>demanding</u> syllabuses) | <input type="text"/> |
| 5. Lack of <u>information</u> | <input type="text"/> |
| 6. Course <u>topics</u> (difficult) | <input type="text"/> |
| 7. Finding a suitable <u>study method</u> | <input type="text"/> |
| 8. The high level of <u>self-organization</u> and self-management required | <input type="text"/> |
| 9. <u>Library</u> services | <input type="text"/> |
| 10. Lack of <u>places</u> to study | <input type="text"/> |
| 11. The splitting of the Faculty among <u>several sites</u> | <input type="text"/> |
| 12. The high <u>costs</u> of attending university | <input type="text"/> |
| 13. Shortage of <u>computers</u> | <input type="text"/> |
| 14. The <u>disorganization</u> of the Faculty (belated information, overcrowding, etc.)..... | <input type="text"/> |
| 15. Too many <u>exam sessions</u> | <input type="text"/> |
| 16. Other..... | <input type="text"/> |
| 98. Doesn't know..... | <input type="text"/> |

25) According to you, in what sectors do graduates in political science have the best chances of finding employment? (FREE ANSWER, BUT MARK THREE SECTORS AT MOST)

- 1. Politics and political party organizations.....
- 2. Employers' associations (industrial relations)
- 3. Trade unions (industrial relations)
- 4. Civil service
- 5. Teaching

6. Human resources management	o
7. Journalism, publishing, information media	o
8. Research institutes (public and private)	o
9. Marketing and advertising	o
10. Public relations	o
11. Diplomatic corps, EC and international organizations	o
12. Banking and insurance	o
13. Financial consultancy (accountancy, etc.)	o
14. Business	o
15. Social services	o
16. Other.....	o
98. Doesn't know.....	o

5) What were the main reasons for your decision to enrol at the Faculty of Political Science? (FREE ANSWER, BUT MARK THREE REASONS AT MOST)

1. No entrance test	0
2. Relatively easy degree course	0
3. Attendance not compulsory	0
4. Compatible with work. Possible to work and study at the same time ...	0
5. Not accepted by faculty of first choice	0
6. Subjects not excessively technical; it is a non-specialist degree course.....	0
7. Close to home	0
8. Wanted to go to university but did not know which degree course to select (choice by exclusion)	0
9. Multidisciplinary programme	0
10. To address political, social and cultural issues	0
11. Because s/he liked it	0
12. Because of the subjects taught	0
13. The good reputation of the Faculty	0
14. The prestige of certain lecturers	0
15. Useful for job	0
16. Because of employment prospects	0
17. To find a culturally stimulating environment	0
18. Because some of his/her friends had enrolled	0
19. Persuaded to do so by parents.....	0
20. Other	0
98. Doesn't know/Can't remember	0

Question no. 5 on motives (which guided the choice of the Faculty of Political Science), like other questions, has a long list of item-motives; too long for the interviewer to handle straightforwardly. To help the interviewer, the motives were then divided into three areas⁴ matching the researcher's classification:

1. instrumental motives (items 1-8)
2. vocational motives (items 9-17)
3. social influence (items 18-19)

The interviewers were thus helped in their task (and also because they knew the items well, having been involved in writing them). Then, if they were not immediately able to locate the interviewee's answer in the range of the pre-established items, they continued to talk to the interviewee until they understood which pre-coded item best matched his/her case. If there was still no matching item, they marked 'Other', noting down key words from the reply. They then wrote a more developed comment (2-3 lines) upon completion of the interview.

If the interview was conducted face-to-face, the interviewer was also able to ask the interviewee if s/he agreed with the response alternatives selected (on his/her behalf). If the interviewee disagreed, the meaning of his/her comments was renegotiated in order to find (at this point with the interviewee) the most appropriate response alternatives.

5. CONVERSATIONALISING QUESTIONS: BROADENING THE INTERVIEWER'S TASKS

As I have emphasised, application of Galtung's procedure requires changing the interviewer's contemporary role and broadening his/her tasks.

⁴ These three categories has also been used as recode in order to deal with the problem of statistical significance.

The role of interviewer has long been discussed in the survey literature. As J.M. Converse (1987: 95) reminds us, in the 1920s and 1930s some academic, and especially a good deal of the market research, literature 'placed the interviewer in some sort of middle ground of freedom and responsibility, with questions less standardised (...) There was concern that trying to standardise the interview more fully might interfere with the communication process'.

The interviewer was advised to act responsibly, with the freedom to 'conversationalise' questions without modifying their meaning. The directors of market research studies believed that the standardisation of interviewer's behaviour was mandatory in laboratory experiments, but that it could not work in interview situations, where constant adaptation of the questionnaire to respondents and social situations was necessary. This kind of interviewer autonomy is still fairly commonplace in market research, though nobody would admit.

At the beginning of the 1950s, this (wise) practice was replaced, at least in academic research, by another one (standardisation) affected by the behaviourist perspective (Hamilton 1929, Rice 1929), and it still affects contemporary survey methodology. According to this practice, the response alternatives must be selected by respondents only. However, respondents are often biased in their interpretation of the meanings of response alternatives, which are often quite different from the meanings attributed by researchers. Because the assumption of a natural correspondence between psychological and numerical intervals has not yet been proven (Pawson 1982: 54), and formal languages are incompatible with natural ones (Pawson 1982; 1983), it is necessary to let interviewers act as interpreters in order to make them responsible for selection *on behalf of* the respondent (Galtung 1967: 120) and for (always imperfect) translations from the respondent's ordinary language to the formal or mathematical language underlying measurement scales. As Groves states "interviewers should be trained in the

concepts inherent in the questions and be allowed to probe, rephrase, and adapt the questionnaire to individual respondent needs” (1989: 404).

From this perspective, interviewers and respondents should work together to ‘jointly construct’ the meaning of questions and answers (Mishler 1986), because there is a conflict between interviews as conversation and interviews as data-collection, owing to the fact that surveys (in order to succeed) rely on conversational norms which suppress ‘interactional resources that routinely mediate uncertainties of relevance and interpretation’ (Suchman and Jordan 1990: 241) in conversations.⁵ As Schober and Conrad (1997) have shown, in a laboratory experiment with trained telephone interviewers using both standardized techniques and flexible interviewing, there is no substantial difference in response accuracy when the concepts in the questions are clearly mapped onto the fictional situations of respondents. In addition, and even more interesting, when the mapping was less clear, flexible interviewing increased accuracy by almost 60 percent.⁶

5.1 The conversational survey and its enemies... and supporters

However, opposition to this procedure is widespread in the literature, even if it seems to be based more on a methodological narrative than on data. Hyman *et al.*

⁵ It would be beyond the scope of this essay to go into the serious interactional problems which a standardized behaviour poses. Interviewers who strictly follow the rules of standardized interviewing (as stated e.g. in Brenner 1985, 19; Survey Research Center of Berkeley 1990; Bailey 1978; Fowler 1984; Fowler e Mangione 1990) frequently present themselves to respondents as impolite, insensitive, and unintelligent because they ask redundant questions. Houtkoop-Seenstra (2000: 183) proposes: ‘we should give interviewers the freedom to draw inferences and then verify them with the respondents. If a respondent [in a previous comment] mentions ‘my husband’, the interviewer should not ask whether the respondent is ‘single, married, a widow, or living together’ but should be allowed to verify that the respondent is married (...) in a leading manner’.

⁶ Houtkoop-Seenstra (2000: 182) suggests allowing interviewers to accept unformatted answers because respondents ‘have a hard time remembering the list of response options for the duration of the interview. When interviewers respond to an unformatted answer by re-offering the response options, thus implicitly informing the respondent how he or she should answer the questions, the transcripts show that respondents follow this rule for only a short time. A few questions later we find them providing unformatted answers again’.

(1942), Feldman *et al.* (1951), Hauck and Steinkamp (1964) and Clausen (1968) re-appraised the alarmism about the effect of interviewer's attitudes, opinion and personality on respondent's answers and showed a bias 'of moderate magnitude' (about 10%) (Hyman *et al.* 1954: 244). As regards Hyman *et al.*'s theory that interviewer's 'attitude-structure expectations' (1942: 59), 'role expectations' (1942: 62) and 'probability expectations' (1942: 64), Hageaars and Heinen (1982: 125) write that Hyman's statements are based upon few data. Likewise, Sudman and Bradburn (1974: 138) believe that the biases introduced by questionnaire tasks, social desirability, forgetting, and so on, are more dangerous than the interviewer's behaviour. Bradburn and Sudman (1979: 50 and 171-172) conclude that interviewer errors do not have significant effects on the quality of data. Dohrenwend and Richardson (1956) argue that most errors are caused by overly tight control and that interviewers must learn to be more responsive to respondents. Peneff (1988) has provided a very revealing insight into practice on the ground. Having observed interviewers involved in a large field survey, Peneff maintains that in reality survey interviewers adopt the qualitative interviewer's skills. They try to interest respondents by letting their own personalities show, they interact in a non-neutral way, and add personal comments to avoid misunderstanding or refusal. This should not be seen as cheating, but as adapting the interview process to the subject's definition of the situation. The interviewers studied by Peneff, who were regarded by the field survey director as his most successful interviewers, proved to be those who used these techniques the most (the survey director was appalled when Peneff told him this). Peneff uses this finding to argue that in practice the methods of qualitative sociology penetrate the survey interview.

Nevertheless, the dogma on standardization is still alive. In a survey conducted in a valley area of South Wales, Michael Brenner — following the method of Cannell, Lawson and Hauser (1975) — documented that approximately 30% of questions

were not correctly asked by interviewers, and that this bias had a negative effect on 13% of responses (1982: 155). However, this result is inconsistent with the data presented by Brenner later: 'when these questions were asked directly so that definite answers were suggested to the respondents' the percentage of answers considered adequate (by the author) increased to 20% (1982: 157). This finding means that the interviewer's directive style produces a remarkable increase in the response quality, larger than when the methodologically correct non-directive style of asking questions is used. The complementary results of Brenner's research indirectly document the thesis of this essay: it is not the interviewer's non-standardised behaviour itself that is responsible for response errors, but only *some* incorrect moves by the interviewer in modifying question meaning, fast reading of questions, not using the card required with the question, and so on.

Dijkstra and van der Zouwen (1988) have replicated both Cannell, Lawson and Hauser's (1975) and Brenner's (1982) studies. In relation to interviewers, they found: a mean of 4% of *deviations from the questionnaire*; 8% of *irrelevant behaviours*; a mean of 10% of *hinting* from the questionnaire (p. 30) and if the interviewer has to probe further, the percentage of suggestive questions posed by the interviewer ranges from 15 to 23 percent (p. 31); and finally 16% of *choosing behaviours* (in behalf of respondents). Because an interviewer's error does not *necessarily* produce a response error, the crucial question is this: to what extent do the interviewer's errors really affect the data quality? In other words, as Schober and Conrad stress:

since interviewers always influence responses, this raises the question of which kinds of influence are benign and which are not. We argue that the criterion should be how interviewer behaviours affect response accuracy – that is, how well responses correspond with the definition the survey author had in the mind (2002: 69).

In this regard, it is important to recall Beatty's statement:

We are, after all, interested in reducing *total* error in surveys. If attacking the slightest interviewers deviation brings about modest reduction of interviewer error — but simultaneously causes a *great increase* in error from the respondent, who is unable to draw on the communicative resources of an informed, intelligent interviewer — then the strategy is self-defeating (1995: 154).

Comparing the performance of *bad* interviewers who committed many errors with the style of *good* interviewers who made only a few, Dijkstra and van der Zouwen (1988: 32) show that the size of bias introduced by bad interviewers is not so marked as to point to the interviewer's performance. Indeed, even a serious error such as 'choosing behaviour on the part of the interviewer appeared to have the least effect in the observed relations between respondent type and respondent answer'.

Directing too much attention to interviewer's effects is like, to use an old saying, 'not seeing the wood for the trees'. The wood is the long list of biases mainly imputable to the questionnaire (or to the researchers as its designers) and to respondents (see Gobo 2006, 286-7, tab. 2).

6. CONCLUSION

From the 1930s onwards, the use of open-ended questions was resisted on the grounds that the procedure was uneconomical: in particular, such questions took longer (and were therefore more costly) to administer, classify and interpret (Oppenheim 1966, 41).

However, Galtung's technique has two considerable advantages. Firstly, it obviates these drawbacks (i.e. it is not so uneconomical); secondly, it yields all the advantages of open-ended questions, particularly their greater fidelity compared with closed-ended questions (which force interviewees to think in the same way as the researcher and to use his/her cognitive categories), and the fact that such questions grasp more dimensions of meaning (Groves, Fultz and Martin 1992, 60).

Galtung's technique therefore collects more valid answers without increasing the costs of administering the questionnaire. In fact, the conversation time between INT and R lost in giving the answer compensates for the time taken by the interviewer (or by the interviewee, if s/he is given cards) to read the list of the response alternatives.

Obviously, this procedure releases the interviewer from the obligation of standardising his/her behaviour. But only this, because the standardisation of meanings (as we shall see) is still an irremovable obligation which can be fulfilled by flexible interviewing. Yet the magnitude of the (alleged) 'dangerousness' of the interviewer is still wholly to be quantified, given that interviewer's errors seem of secondary importance and far smaller than researcher's and respondent's errors. As Bradburn states "the characteristics of the task(s) of the questionnaire) are the major source of response effects and are, in general, much larger than effects due to interviewer or respondent characteristics" (1983: 291).

In addition Schaeffer reminds us:

"criticisms of traditional standardized interviewing are particularly effective when taken together with research which suggests that the recall of events may be improved by procedures that do not fit neatly within the linear structure of standardized interview (Means, Swan, Jobe and Esposito 1992), that a less formal style of standardized interviewing may be more motivating (e.g., Dijkstra 1987), and that interviewers do not always implement standardization well (...) and a

formal standardized interview may not be the best social environment for stimulating and motivating recall of complex topics” (1995: 83)

This consideration leads to the problem of how to improve data quality, and how Galtung’s procedure can be implemented efficaciously. Rather than pursuing the illusory goal of improving the wording only in order to reduce the need for interviewer probes (as suggested by Fowler and Mangione 1990: 46) because “total elimination of interviewer error is impossible” (Beatty 1995: 155), we can achieve data quality by giving the interviewer a more active role, in order to bridge questionnaire and respondent, and to reduce the gap between researchers’ and respondents’ meanings. In David Riesman’s (1958: 305) words: “the task of the interviewer, as I see it, (is) to adapt the standard questionnaire to the unstandardized respondents”.

Several studies⁷ have evidenced that standardising the stimuli (i.e. questions, items, response alternatives and interviewer’s behaviour) does not necessary imply standardisation of their meanings, which should remain the main aim of every data collection. As Houtkoop-Seenstra concludes:

“having studied tape-recorded standardized survey interviews for some years now, I have become increasingly convinced that the quest for standardization is no longer tenable, at least if its purpose is to generate not only reliable, but also valid, research data (...) We should allow interviewers-as-spokesperson to discuss with respondents the intended meaning and purpose of questions, as well as the respondent’s answers. This discussion may increase the validity of the research data, even though a more flexible way of interviewing may at times cause

⁷ Nuckols (1953), Cicourel (1964: 108), Galtung (1967: 116); Bourdieu *et al.* (1968: 70); Gostkowski (1974: 19); Marradi (1984); Pitrone (1984: 35-36); Mishler (1986); Briggs (1984); Suchman and Jordan (1990), Houtkoop-Seenstra (2000: 180-184).

inappropriate interviewer behaviour, such as presenting the respondent with leading questions” (2000: 180 and 182).

Clearly, the aim of reducing respondent errors by broadening the interviewer’s tasks will lead to an increase in interviewer effects. However, the dilemma is deciding which kind of errors we prefer to minimise. In addition, the magnitude of interviewer’s errors is far smaller than those of respondent’s because a) a trained interviewer knows the purpose and correct meaning of questions, items and response alternatives better than respondents, and b) the meanings in the (relatively small) ‘interviewers’ community’ are more consistent than in the mass of socially and culturally different respondents.

In other words, the questionnaire and interviewer’s behaviour must be interviewee-centred and *really* tailored to respondents and their differences.

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