INTERVIEWERS AND THE SOURCES OF ERRORS IN THE APPLICATION OF OPINION QUESTIONNAIRES

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Abstract
This article analyzes the theoretical and practical aspects concerning research based on questionnaires, the errors which arise in the application of questionnaires, as well as the importance of training the interviewers. The first sections approach the particularities of empirical research and the procedural aspects of the activity of interviewers. A special place is held by the psychological and social interactions that are instituted between the interviewer and the questioned person, an interaction regarded from the perspective of the errors and the sources of errors in conducting the interview. Starting from the bibliography studied and the author's experience as a researcher at institute of public opinion polling, the last part of the article focuses upon the typical skills required in the training of students from the profile faculties for the participation at field research initiated by the economical organizations, institutions or entities.

Keywords: *interviewer, questionnaire, errors, sources of errors, skill standards.*

The questionnaire as a research tool and technique

Research based on questionnaires refers to the acquisition of data, information and opinion with the purpose of explaining social facts, phenomena or processes. Although social research have as their methodological principle the unit between theoretical and empirical, a distinction is often made between theoretical and field research. The latter involves the direct observation of the reality, the application of specific methods and techniques of data collection (investigation, questionnaire, interview), as well as establishing certain correlations between different types of phenomena, behaviors or social attitudes.

In the practical order of things, field research involves two methods: the sociological investigation and the survey. While the sociological investigation mainly uses the questionnaire and the interview to collect information referring to the information about subjective aspects (opinions, attitudes, interests, aspirations etc.) and objective aspects (the structure of the family, age, level of income, occupation etc.), the main task of the survey is to show the interests expressed by a significant number of people connected to a problem of general importance. The distinction between the two methods consists in the balance of interrogative means of collecting information in the case of sociological investigations and the limitation of the research area in the case of the survey.

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In both cases, the main technique of collecting data and information is the questionnaire. As Rotariu and Iluţ (2008), Chelcea (2009), Babbie (2010), Jupp (2010) and others note, the questionnaire is a technique of collecting information through questions addressed to people selected after certain criteria of illustration connected to a problem upon which there are numerous points of views. Its main characteristic lies in the array of questions written or graphic images, ordered in a certain succession by which the people who take part in the research are asked to express their opinion about the problem or problems which constitute the object of the investigation.

An important aspect which the authors mentioned refers to the fact that the answers to the questions included in the questionnaire differ from one individual to another, their verbal behavior being influenced by the personality of the person questioned, by the place where the research is conducted, the theme of the investigation, the structure of the questionnaire, the period of time when the research takes place, the personality of the interviewer or the formulation of the questions.

Another aspect concerns the distinction between different types of questionnaires. From this point of view, the practice of psychosocial research has consecrated a classification of the questionnaires according to their content, the form of the questions and their application method. In short, the first interview makes a distinction between questionnaires of factual data (referring to objective facts which can also be directly observed by other people) and opinion questionnaires (which permit the study of the attitudes, motivation, interests and the psychological dispositions of the people questioned).

According to the second criteria – the form of the questions – one can distinguish between questionnaires with closed questions (which permit the choice between answers established beforehand), questionnaires with open questions (which leave the subjects the freedom of individualized expression of their answers) and questionnaires that include both closed and open questions.

Last but not least, according to the application, we can distinguish between self-administered questionnaires (which imply the registration of answers by the people included in the investigated sample), respectively questionnaires administered by investigators or interviewers (most commonly used in the collection of information for sociological investigations or surveys.

Starting from the idea highlighted by Chelcea (2004, p.119-120) according to which the use of interviewers ensures the representativeness of the sample, that they can clarify the meaning of different types of questions and that they can supply important information regarding the behavior of the respondent, I will now approach a few practical aspects of the activity of interviewers.

The questionnaires administered by the interviewers
Due to the large workload involved by the collection of information from different categories of people included in the research, the sociological investigation and the survey involves not only people qualified to design interviews, but also interviewers especially trained for the administration of questionnaires. The practice of research in this field insist upon the following responsibilities of the interviewers or of the investigators: finding the people included in the sample, obtaining their collaboration in conducting the interview, asking the questions and recording the answers.

Following this sequence, I will exemplify the mode of action of the operators for each situation separately, with the purpose of supplying conclusions for the practice of the students from the specializations from the fields of education sciences and social assistance, but also of those who specialize in the fields of social and humanistic sciences. I should also add that the examples I will use are based on both the specialized bibliography and the author's own experience as a researcher and territorial coordinator for research within The Romanian Institute for Public Opinion Polling (IRSOP) in Bucharest.

a) Usually, the sample allocated to each operator is considering the establishment of an itinerary which includes the streets whose names begin with certain letters and the choice of subjects for the interview is to be done based on an algorithm similar to the one described below:

- Choosing the house or the building:
▪ You are in the established starting point;
▪ Walk on the left hand side of the street;
▪ Stop in front of the third building. If you are in an area with apartment houses, stop at the third block entrance;
▪ Enter this building and apply a single interview;
▪ Exit the building. Continue in the same direction until the next third building and so forth;
▪ Do not cross on the other side of the street. Continue only on the left hand side;
▪ If you have walked the entire length of the selected street and if you still have people to question, then choose the next street indicated proceeding as mentioned above;
▪ The procedure goes on until the application of all the interviews allocated.
- As for the person who administers the interview, we will proceed as follows:
▪ In the given family, ask who is the person with an age over 18 who celebrated their birthday most recently and apply the interview;
▪ If the selected person refuses to collaborate or is unavailable momentarily, leave the building and keep on walking, selecting the next third building;
▪ Please return twice to the addresses where it was impossible to proceed with the interview because there was nobody at home or because the eligible person was not at home. Try to set a meeting with the person who was not home, at the place and hour of his choice.

Of course, according to the specific of the research one can also use other criteria of selecting people for the interview, criteria which can refer to age, sex or the level of income, as well as to the use of a product or service, to develop their activity in a certain field or have a certain level of education and training.

b) Obtaining the collaboration of the person selected for the interview is one of the most disputed problems in the specialty literature, but beyond these controversies certain practical aspects are considered to be absolutely necessary. In the case of the interview based on a questionnaire, a few general rules of conducting the conversation between the operator and the interviewed person should be remembered, such as (cf. Ferreol, 1998; Miftode, 2003; Chelcea, 2009; Sandu, 2012):

▪ During the introduction part, the operator must say his name and legitimize himself, informing the person who is going to be questioned about the purpose of the research, the survey institute who conducts the given research, the fact that the choice of

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the respective person was done randomly and that the information it will supply are confidential.

▪   People who are less willing to take part in the interview must receive an explanation connected to the importance of the research, the fact that their perspectives concerning the investigated problems have a great significance and that the lack of cooperation would make the selected sample less representative;

▪   Through his entire conduct, the operator must dispel any doubt concerning the aim of the investigation and the method of selection of the person for the interview, the time allocated for the interview, as well as upon the fact that what matters are only the opinions concerning the problems discussed in the questionnaire. If the selected person does not want to collaborate for different reasons (the theme of the interview, the lack of time, the place where the interview should be applied, lack of information concerning the subject of investigation etc.), the operator will select another person from the sample to apply the interview.

c) As for the way of asking the questions, the interviewer must follow the order established in the standard questionnaire, having the obligation to read each question "word by word". Since the purpose is to obtain uniformity in the questions asked and in the answers registered, the operators are not authorized to make changes in the questions nor to formulate explanations which could influence in any way the answers given.

However, empirical research highlight the fact that the majority of the operators are tempted to add an explanatory word, to make alterations in the succession of the questions, or to "shorten" certain questions. One of the classical solutions given to these problems belongs to the British researcher C.A. Moser, who draws attention upon the following aspects: "If the questions are asked in daily language, the operators will be less inclined to reformulate them. If the operators are allowed to poll connecting certain questions, the danger of an unauthorized poll becomes smaller. If the order of the questions is made so that with the help of occasional linking phrases, the interview develops logically and similar to a conversation, there will be a smaller temptation to omit certain questions or to change their order (1967, p.271).

Another problem is the registration given by the interviewed person to the questions which involve the frequency of a certain behavior or the intensity of their opinion towards a certain theme. For instance, in a pre-election survey, if the respondents are asked to answer the question of how possible it for them to take part in the election, they may opt for one of the following answer options:

1.   Almost certainly
2.   Maybe
3.   I haven't decided
4.   I will not vote
5.   I don't know

In order to obtain a valid answer, at the next question the person is asked to express his intention on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 means he is almost sure he will vote, and 1 that he certainly will not. If the person's answer is still "I don't know", the operator must register it accordingly.

As for the last aspect, the analysts of psychosocial phenomena draw attention upon the fact that this answer may be interpreted as a form of denial or as a lack of information regarding the object of investigation, but also as a form of incapacity of the respondent to

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take a decision or the "fear" that he would give a "wrong" answer. "In no case whatsoever, writes Moser, should the operator express his own opinions; on the contrary, the interlocutors with a contradiction spirit might be influenced to adopt a contrary position, while others might give answers which they thinks are to the liking of the operator. In both cases, concludes the British researcher, the answers would wrongly represent the true opinions of the questioned person" (1969, p.273).

Important statements are also brought by S. Chelcea (2004; 2009), when he shows that, although the relationship investigation operator – interviewed person is characterized by a certain asymmetry of laterality, the interview operator can reduce people's shyness by explaining to them the principles of the sociological investigation or of the poll, insisting upon the fact that there aren't any good or bad answers and that the interview situation has nothing to do with the examination situation.

d) As we have already shown, in investigations based on questionnaires the operators themselves must register the answers. Although at first glance the registration of answers might seem as a relatively simple task, the fact that the operators commit numerous errors of registration give rise to certain problems of principle. Firstly, if we take into consideration the route that the operator must follow to select the people for the interview, it is easy to understand that the tiredness that he accumulates and the somewhat "mechanical" method in which he must fill in the questionnaire.

Secondly, the operate must code the answers according to a rather complicated set of rules, and the discomfort created by the lack of cooperation of some of the people with whom they must do the interview.

Thirdly, the operator must focus simultaneously upon more tasks referring to the preparation of the question, to the registration of the answers to pre-coded questions, the filling in of incomplete or insufficiently precise answers, to the signals of misunderstanding the question or to the faithful registration of the answers given by the questioned person to open questions.

That is why, at the end of the interview, the operator is obliged to check if he asked all the questions, if he registered all the answers, if he circled the right codes and if there isn't any contradiction between the answers obtained. Moreover, he must register his own impressions upon the development of the interview and upon the problems he encountered, as well as his appreciations connected to the degree of credibility of the answers obtained from the questioned person.

The errors owed to interview operators and to the people questioned
The methodology of social research systematized a typology of errors and sources of errors. They envisage on the one hand the errors connected to the samples and the ones regarding the construction of a questionnaire or of the interview guideline, and, on the other hand, the activity of interview operators and the people questioned within the research. Since the first category of errors is connected to the activity of specialized researchers, I will focus upon the errors owed to the interview operators and to the people questioned, with the specification that the aspects I will mention were theoretically based on the works of Moser (1969), Miftode (2003), Chelcea (2004; 2009), Rotariu and Iluţ (2008), Babbie (2010) and others.

In connection to the interview operator, a fist category of errors are those owed to personality features which actually have no connection to the theme of the study

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developed. I am talking about features regarding the physical aspect, the temperament, the level of knowledge and the moral features. In this case, the negative affects can find themselves in a large number of denials from the subjects, in the more often frequency of the errors in registering answers and even in possible fraud.

Another category of errors refers to the correlation between the investigation and the attitude or opinions of the operator connected to the problems researched. A significant example is constituted by those situations where the political sympathies of the operator can influence the answers of the subjects. Even if we admit that he is honest, his system of values and attitudes will influence, to a certain extent, the responses of the subjects and their registration, functioning those spontaneous mechanisms of confirmation and auto reproduction of those systems, defined by the psychologists as defense systems of the self.

A third category of errors originates in the concrete context of the investigation and envisages what C.A. Moser calls the *"anticipations of the interview operator"*. We are talking about the fact that the operator evaluates the attitude structure of the subject after the answers given to the first questions in the interview. From that moment, the investigated subject is tagged by the operator, who also interprets his following answers in the virtue of that image. In other cases, the anticipations of the operator derive from the image he creates by noticing the social status of the investigated people, their social type, age, occupation, income and even their personality. In short, the operator creates an image about the given category of people and when he does not receive firm answers, he will try to attribute them the form he thinks is characteristic to the respective category of respondents.

C.A. Moser also mentions the so-called *anticipations of probability*, which consist in suppositions of the operators referring to the expected distribution of the answers to certain questions. More precisely, if the interviewer notices that along the filling in of the questionnaire his theory is not confirmed, he will consider that something is wrong and will have the tendency to fit the answers in those categories which he thinks are not sufficiently frequently chosen.

Such anticipations and projections which belong to the interviewer may determine alterations of the real data, not to mention the practical difficulties in tracing them. This is also the reason why the institutes of sociological research give such a significant attention to the selection of interviewers, their training and the systematic control of their activity.

As for the questioned people, numerous authors state that the sources of error are not only those connected to the uncertainty of the answers. Even if the operator makes the necessary specifications concerning the insurance of the anonymity and the advice to give honest answers, in the practice of empirical research a series of other sources of distortion intervene which alter the results of the investigation.

Starting from the questions we ask and how we ask them, a person can overestimate a behavior or an attitude with the purpose of appearing respectable in front of the operator or can supply a false image about his opinion connected to one problem or another. The investigated person can declare what he thinks might be the opinion of the interviewer or, to a larger extent, to give answers according to a set of norms and values promoted from the social point of view.

This last aspect represents what the analysts of socio-humane phenomena call "valorized answers", "verbal conformism", "social desirability", "prestige effect" etc., by which the individual tends to appear in a favorable light in front of himself or the others.

A series of systematic errors are connected to the limits of human memory. The memory is solicited not only to the reconstruction of what the investigated people thought or stated connected to an event or another, but also to questions referring to social phenomena, activities or actions. Psychology has also unveiled the specific mechanisms by which individuals reconstruct segments of life from their past, as in the case of associating certain events, exploiting lived situations or the functioning of certain mental schemes typical to each person, by which information is interpreted, organized and activated.

By analyzing a series of perceptive mechanisms which generate errors, such as the effect of false consensus, the effect of framing and anchoring, mental simulation or the false difference of chance, T. Rotariu and P. Iluţ signal the more general idea according to which "the subject has his own perspective on the problem discussed in the questionnaire, placing himself in so-called reference frames" (2008, p.119).

The explanation of the two authors refers to the different meaning which the subjects attribute to one and the same word, a situation where whole questions and sentences can get different meanings, while the processing of the data is achieved in the fashion in which there is an identical referential. Then, as the operator makes a series of assumptions and anticipations connected to the person and the answers of the interviewed person, there is a high chance that the latter will also attribute characteristics and intentions to the interviewer or to the person who elaborated the questionnaire.

The conclusion suggested by Rotariu and Iluţ is that the aspects mentioned must be taken into consideration by the researcher when he proceeds with the processing of data and the interpretation of the information, as well as when he formulates proposals regarding the elaboration of a decision. Moreover, the signaling of these errors may help us in understanding better the constraints of sociological research, as well as the possibility of realistically examining the interaction of the sources which generate errors. With this remark, I will move on to discussing the problems connected to the selection of interviewers, their training and the control of their activity.

Demands regarding the selection and training of interviewers
As in the case of the fears discussed above, the literature in the field mentions a high variety of demands regarding the qualities that the interviewers should have, out of which the most numerous concern the following aspects (cf. Miftode, 2003; Albrecht, 2006; Rotariu and Iluţ, 2008; Goleman, 2008; Chelcea, 2009; Beciu, 2011):

▪ Honesty in applying the selection instructions of the people for the interview, in formulating the questions and in using the boards and scales of opinion, as well as in registering the answers obtained. If the fraud connected to the "fabrication" of answers to a questionnaire is easily discovered, the lack of rigor in applying the instructions imposes a prolonged verification from the coordinators of the research. In both cases, the operators who are involved in such derivations should be replaced immediately.

▪ The interest for the researching work and the preoccupation for their own improvement are considered to be essential qualities which recommend a candidate for the operator activity. The practice of research has proved that repeated errors, superficiality or improper work are much more likely to happen when the interviewer considers that his activity is not important.

▪ The capacity to adapt to different types of research or to different categories of people they must question, as well as the capacity to use different questionnaires are

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demands which the operator must know from his first collaborations. Not less important are the aspects connected to the field trips, compliance to the itineraries established, identifying the people for the interview or repeating the visit in the case where the people who are eligible for the interview are not at home or are unavailable.

▪ The personality of the operator and his temperament are demands which can influence decisively the relationships with the respondent, as well as the quality of the answers he will get from him. For this reason, the selection of the operators must be made based on psychological tests, or after a thorough discussion or a practical test connected to the interview. One will exclude from among the candidates people who are shy, who tend to be authoritative, or those who manifest psychological liability, disinterest for the work of an operator, lack of tact, communication difficulties and the lack of aptitudes referring to the establishment of inter-human relations.

▪ The relatively high level of general culture, a satisfying degree of intelligence and a high empathic capacity necessary both for surpassing blockages which may appear in the communication between the operator and the person questioned, as well as for the administration of the defense mechanisms of the respondent (the refusal, the rationalization of the answers, the invocation of pretexts, disagreement between declarations and behaviors, attributing their own attitudes, interests and motivations to other people.

▪ The capacity of analysis and self-control of verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as of the psychological relations which are instituted between the operator and the person questioned in order to obtain the necessary information and to avoid non-responses. I am referring to aspects such as: passing from one question to another, repeating certain questions, further explaining certain questions, the social status of the people questioned, interpreting the precise social context in which the interview or the investigation takes place, avoiding approaching undesirable aspects for the person in question or which would go over his capacity of understanding.

▪ An agreeable physical aspect and a neat attire are considered important conditions in establishing relations between the operator and the respondent in order to obtain the collaboration of the person questioned and of its availability to give honest answers to the questions asked.

Going on to another register of problems, the methodical instruction and the professional training of the interview operators are imposed as necessary for the good development of any sociological investigation or poll. Thus, Miftode (2003), Chelcea (2004; 2009), Babbie (2010), Şimandan (2010) and Sandu (2012) draw attention upon the following more important aspects:

▪ The careful training of the operators before every investigation, with a special focus upon: studying the questionnaire, understanding the different types of questions, respecting the succession of questions, the honest registration of answers, interviewing only the people indicated in the instructions and keeping the confidentiality.

▪ Establishing beforehand whether the interviewers don't have any prejudices connected to smoking, alcohol, ethnical origin, political affiliation, confessional adherence etc., avoiding involving those with significant prejudices in research which investigates phenomena such as those mentioned.

▪ Operators should fill in one of the questionnaires which are to be applied, so that one can meet the difficulties in formulating questions or the degree to which the

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answers of the people questioned concord with the answers given by the operators. With this occasion, one can correlate the possible errors connected to the unfaithful transmission of the instructions, the operator's temptation to get the answer at every price, his tendency to use his own vocabulary in registering the answers to open questions, shortening or lengthening answers, the operators behavior in relation to the person questioned and so on.

No matter how rigorously they may have been selected and trained connected to the application of the questionnaire, the operators remain a potential source of errors in polls or in different sociological research.

For this reason, the control of their activity is imposed, both by checking the questionnaires filled in, as well as by telephone conversations with the people questioned, referring to the criteria of selection, the development of the interview and its length.

Conclusions

From the long list of problems involved by the organization and application of investigations and polls, the activity of the interview operators represents the most sensitive element in the management of any sociological research. This aspect acquires additional valences from at least perspectives: the first one refers to the skills that the interview operators must acquire within the specialty courses from the faculties of psychology, sociology, education sciences, social assistance, marketing or management, and to the practice imposed in the study programs; the second aspect refers to the regulations comprised in the occupational standard of the interview operators in the National Qualifications Framework.

Given the importance of the latter, I will summarize a few requirement which should be taken into consideration in the programs of theoretical and practical training of the students in order to exercise the occupation of interview operator (cf. Council for Occupational Standards and Certification, 1999). In the code of fundamental skills, for instance, the units of skill refer to interactive communication and developing activities within a team, and the specific skills are based on: administering the documents typical to the interview, identifying the sample, the primary processing of the answers, presenting the research theme, promoting the image of the institution who conducts the research, reporting on the activities carried out in the field and the actual conduct of the interview.

An aspect we should highlight is the evaluation guide of the knowledge and skills one must take into consideration for both the fields of competence (fundamental, al the work place, and specific), and the skill units afferent to these fields, all contributing to the increase of the importance of the operator's role and to the tendencies of professionalizing this activity which is meant to increase the quality of psycho-social, social assistance, marketing and management research, whose number increased significantly in recent years in our country.

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