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THE CONTROVERSY OVER DETAILED INTERVIEWS— AN OFFER FOR NEGOTIATION

By PAUL F. LAZARSFELD

FROM the beginning, public opinion research has been badgered by the problem of "depth." Does a simple answer to a simple question *really* reveal a man's opinion? The controversy, if such it may be called, has grown not only between the critics and the pollsters, but among the pollsters themselves. Two philosophies of research have arisen; one wedded to so-called depth interviewing, the other content with more objective methods of research. In this article Dr. Lazarsfeld looks searchingly

at the potential schism. His conclusion is that the difference between the two schools, though valid, need not be crucial; there is, in his opinion, a half-way house.

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IF TWO PEOPLE vigorously disagree on whether something is blue or green, the chances are that the object is composed of both colors and that for some reason the two contestants are either unable or unwilling to see more than the one. If in methodological discussions, competent workers assume vehemently opposite positions, it is generally a good time for someone to enter the scene and suggest that the parties are both right and wrong.

A recent issue of this *QUARTERLY* (Summer, 1943) provides one of the many indications that such a situation has come about in the public opinion field. A representative of the Division of Program Surveys in the Department of Agriculture reports on large-scale research work, the core of which is an interviewing technique "intended to draw full intensive discussions" and using "various non-directive means of stimulating full discussion in the interviewing situation."¹ Preceding this report is an article by a well-known psychologist who dubs this technique "depth interview" and describes it in rather uncomplimentary terms. One of his conclusions is that "there is little or no evidence to support the tacit assumption that the so-called depth interview yields more valid re-

¹ Hans E. Skott, "Attitude Research in the Department of Agriculture," this *QUARTERLY*, 1943, 7, 280-292.

sponses from people than do other types."² For him, simple "yes-no" questions, used judiciously, are sufficient.

The matter is important from more than a scientific point of view. Applied social research is a new venture. Only yesterday did the government begin large-scale studies in public opinion. The market and consumer studies which are now finding acceptance in many industries are likewise all of recent date. Managers in business as well as in public administration are faced with sharply contending factions among research professionals. Should they succumb to skepticism or discouragement and fail to give this new branch of the social sciences the opportunity to prove itself, then development might be seriously retarded. It therefore seems justified to present the problem to a larger public with an earnest effort toward impartiality.

Employing a neutral terminology, we shall allude to our subject as the "open-ended interview." The term serves to describe a crucial aspect of this type of interviewing—the fact that "open-ended interviews" do not set fixed answers in terms of which a respondent must reply. Eventually a more animated expression may be desirable. (To save space we shall abbreviate the term and refer to it hereafter as OI.) Rather than asking for a definition it would be better if the reader visualizes the situation in which an OI occurs. In the interview situation the interviewer by an appropriate introduction attempts to establish the best possible rapport between himself and the respondent because he is aware that he may have to interview the respondent an hour or longer. He then proceeds to ask one of the ten or fifteen questions which have been assigned to him by the central office. Sometimes the respondent himself immediately plunges into great detail, and the interviewer simply permits him to continue. If the first answer is brief, however, the interviewer is instructed to "probe." There are quite a number of devices for eliciting detailed, free response. Mere silence will sometimes induce the respondent to elaborate. Or, the interviewer may just repeat the respondent's own words with an appropriate inflection. Asking for examples will often prove helpful. Then again questions such as the following are used: "How did you happen to notice it? What makes you think so? How did you feel about it before? Do most of your friends have the same opinion?" The trained OI field worker has the goal of

² Henry C. Link, "An Experiment in Depth Interviewing," this *QUARTERLY*, 1943, 7, 267-279.

his inquiry clearly imprinted in his mind, but he adapts his inquiry to the concrete situation between the interviewee and himself.

If properly conducted, such an OI will result in a detailed document which covers the whole area under investigation, including the interviewer's observations of the respondent's reactions and background.

The OI is suggested by its proponents in opposition to what one might term the "straight poll question." The latter gives the respondent the occasion to answer only "Yes," "No," "Don't know," or to make a choice among a small number of listed possible answers. Between these two extremes there are, of course, several steps. Actually there is hardly a poll where there is not some freedom left for the respondent to express himself in his own way. It is not necessary here to discuss where the straight poll question ends and the OI begins. For all practical purposes the distinction is clear enough.

A rather thorough survey of published and unpublished studies based on the OI technique was made for the purpose of this paper. It is necessary to describe and classify these in some detail because many current misunderstandings come from an insufficient distinction among the different functions of the OI; if people disagree on its usefulness, they very often do not have the same functions in mind. It is the plan of this paper to present the main uses of the OI at their very best and to stress the advantages which are generally singled out by the advocates of this technique. Then we shall select a specific criterion for evaluation and summarize pertinent criticism. It is hoped that as a result we shall end up with a balanced view on the subject.

THE SIX MAIN FUNCTIONS OF THE OI TECHNIQUE

I. *Clarifying the meaning of a respondent's answer.* Before asking him whether war profits should be limited, we have to find out what the respondent thinks the word "profit" means. Some people talk of the total income of a company as profit, others believe it is the difference between wholesale and retail prices, still others are of the opinion that war profits are the difference between pre-war and war earnings. By discussing the general subject matter with him we are very likely to obtain a fairly clear picture of what would be equivalent to his *private definition* of these terms. One frequently underestimates the number of terms which seem obvious to the interviewer but which are ambiguous or even unknown to the lower educated section of the population.

In other cases it is not so much the meaning of words as the *implication of an opinion* which has to be clarified. If a respondent is in favor of reducing taxes, does he know that as a result many government services will have to be reduced? If he is in favor of free speech, does he realize that such freedom must also pertain to people who may express opinions that are very distasteful to him?

If respondents are asked to voice their thoughts on a course of action, it is important to know against what *alternative possibilities* they had weighed their choice. A respondent is for the continuation of the Dies Committee: has he weighed that against the possibility that the Department of Justice can adequately handle the problem of subversive activities, or did he feel that if the Dies Committee does not do so, no one else will? Another respondent is for government regulation of business: does he prefer this to completely free enterprise, or has he considered the different ways by which an individual business man can be regulated through his own trade organizations?

Finally, the OI permits a respondent to clarify his opinion by introducing *qualifications*. He is in favor of rationing if it is administered fairly for everyone. He is in favor of married women getting defense jobs if it has been made sure that there are no unemployed men left. The respondent might not volunteer such qualifications if the interview is a too hurried one.

2. *Singling out the decisive aspects of an opinion.* If we deal with attitudes toward rather complex objects, we often want to know the *decisive aspects* by which a respondent is guided. Take the opinion on *candidates* for public office. At this moment, for example, the Republicans in some mid-western states prefer Dewey to Willkie as Presidential nominee. What does Dewey stand for in the eyes of these people? Party Loyalty? Isolationism? Administrative ability? Gang-busting? Here again the OI would proceed in characteristic fashion. What has the respondent heard about the two candidates? What does he think would happen if Dewey were to become President? And so on. In the end we should be able to distinguish groups for which Dewey means quite different things, and fruitful statistical comparisons on a number of social characteristics could be carried through.

Similar possibilities can come up when people are called upon to judge *concrete situations*. They do or do not like the working conditions in their plants. If the answer is in the negative, what features do they

especially dislike? In order to get a reasonable idea of people's complaints a rather detailed discussion is necessary; the OI is a good device for this purpose. Other examples of such procedure can easily be found: to what does the respondent attribute rising prices? Or the increase in juvenile delinquency?

Here belong also some recent efforts in the field of *communications* research. People like or dislike a film or a radio program. Through detailed discussions it is possible to bring out quite clearly which elements in the production make for the audience's reaction.³

The singling out of decisive aspects also pertains to *issues*. If respondents are against sending lend-lease supplies to Russia, it is important to know what about such a policy they dislike. Do they disapprove of Russian communism, or do they think that the Russians do not need the supplies, or do they feel that other parts of the world war panorama are more important? Here, again, the OI would not only ask for an opinion on the basic issues but would probe the respondents for further details.

Very often the decisive aspects of a candidate, a situation, a document or an issue will be elicited by starting a discussion with the words: "Why do you think so?" Or, "Why do you prefer . . . ?" But hardly ever will one such question give all the necessary information. If people prefer Dewey as the Republican nominee and are asked why they do so, they will very often say, "Because he is the better man," or, "Because a friend feels the same way." Then the interviewer must keep in mind the fact that he is looking for decisive features and must keep on asking questions. For instance: "What makes him a better man?" Or, "Why do you think your friend favors him?"⁴

3. *What has influenced an opinion.* If people approve of an issue or vote for a candidate (or buy a product), it is useful to divide the determining factors of such action into three main groups: the *decisive features* of the object in question, which account for its being chosen; the *predispositions* of the respondents, which make them act one way or

³ P. F. Lazarsfeld and R. K. Merton, "Studies in Radio and Film Propaganda," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Series II, 1943, 6, No. 2, 58-79.

⁴ It should be emphasized that the question "why" is useful also for the other purposes which will be discussed in the remaining four points. This is easily understood if one considers that the word has hardly any meaning in itself. It is about equivalent to saying that the respondent should talk some more. "Why" is a good start, but it seldom leads to a constructive end if it is not followed by specific questions directed toward what the interviewer really wants to know.

another; and the *influences which are brought to bear upon them*, especially those which mediate between them and the object of their choice.⁵ The use of the OI to investigate the first group has just been discussed. The quest for predispositions (attitude, motives) will be dealt with under points four and five. We now consider the use of the OI in the search for *influences*.

The typical research situation here is one wherein we try to assess the importance of a certain event. Let us turn, for example, to people who bought bonds after listening to Kate Smith or who started storing potatoes after a government campaign to this effect had been started or who improved their production records after a system of music-while-you-work had been introduced in a plant. A well-conducted OI should provide enough information so that the causal role of the exposure can be appraised. The rules for such interviews have been rather well worked out.⁶

If the respondent claims that the specific speech had an effect on him, a sort of cross-examination is necessary along the following lines: Wasn't he ready to perform the final act before he heard the speech? Didn't something else happen after the speech which is a more likely explanation for his action? If the respondent denies being affected by the speech, then the whole interview has to be conducted as if the purpose were to break down this contention: Why didn't the respondent act before he heard the speech? Did he have any other sources of information? In other words, the technique consists of checking up on whether, according to logical and psychological commonsense, the respondent would have acted otherwise than he did if he had not heard the speech or read the pamphlet. Obviously it is not possible to anticipate all the questions which have to be asked in order to bring to light the elements preceding the final act and surrounding the influence under investigation. The task of the OI is to draw out those factors so sharply that the reader of the interview can form a judgment as to whether any causal role of the influence should be assumed or not.

This technique of unearthing influences by OIs is especially pertinent to advertising problems because of the insistent use of the same "stimuli" in radio programs or magazine campaigns. With the Govern-

⁵ Paul Lazarsfeld, "The Art of Asking Why," *National Marketing Review*, 1, 1935, 32-43.

⁶ Paul Lazarsfeld, "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Advertising by Direct Interviews," *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, July-August, 1941.

ment turning to "campaigns" to influence the consumption or saving habits of the citizenry, however, it would deserve more attention from students of public opinion. During election campaigns similar problems come up, particularly if an effort is made to study those people who at the beginning of the campaign had not yet formulated opinions.

4. *Determining complex attitude patterns.* A fourth group of applications comes into play when we turn to the *classification of rather complex attitude patterns*. If we want to ascertain how active people are in their war participation or how disturbed they are by current food shortages, the OI actually discusses such subject matters with the respondents, getting their recent experiences and reactions. The purpose is to make an adequate classification of the material so obtained. Further assumptions come easily to mind. People can be classified according to how satisfied they are with local handling of the draft situation, according to the ways they adjust to the lack of gasoline, according to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the amount of information they get on the war, etc. This procedure is singularly characteristic of Rensis Likert's work in the Department of Agriculture.⁷

If it is used to assess the extent to which respondents are concerned with a certain problem and how intensely they feel about it; this approach assumes special importance. Two respondents might give the same answer to a simple opinion poll question. For the one, however, it is an important issue on which he has spent much thought, whereas the other may have formed his opinion spontaneously as the poll investigator asked him about it. The possible perfunctory nature of replies to public opinion polls has been the object of much criticism. Those who feel strongly in favor of the OI emphasize that right at this point such a danger is obviated—the danger that poll results will be misleading because they do not take into account intensity of feeling or amount of concern.

This role of the OI does not necessarily terminate with a one-dimensional rating scale of, say, intensity of feeling. The OI is suitable for more complex ratings as well. In a study of people's reactions to changes in food habits, sponsored by the National Research Council, the interviewers were instructed to "watch carefully for all offhand comments to

⁷ Likert's work is mainly done for Government agencies and therefore cannot be quoted at the present time. The present paper owes much to discussions with him and some of his associates, especially Bill Gold.

one of the following frames of reference: Money, Health, Taste, Status."⁸ The procedure was to talk with people about current food shortages, the adjustments they had made, and the points at which they experienced difficulties. From their discussion it was possible to classify them into four groups according to which of the four contexts they spontaneously stressed. The study found, for example, that high-income groups refer to health twice as often as money, whereas in low-income groups money is the frame of reference three times more frequently than is health.

Finally we have what is known as the "gratification study." In an analysis of the gratification people get from the Professor Quiz programs, for example, a variety of appeals could be distinguished. Some listeners are very much intrigued by the competitive element of the contest; others like to test their own knowledge; still others hope to learn something from the questions posed on the program.⁹ We could not expect the untrained respondent to explain clearly the psychological complexities of his interest or his reaction. It is not even likely that he would classify himself accurately if we let him choose among different possibilities. Again the OI is needed to provide the necessary information for the trained analyst. Its practical use lies in the following direction: If we know what attitudes are statistically dominant we can either strengthen the "appeal" elements in the program which are likely to get an enlarged audience; or we can try to change these attitudes if, for some ulterior reason, we consider the prevailing distribution unsatisfactory.

Such studies have also been made in the public opinion field; for example, in analyzing the gratification people get out of writing letters to senators.¹⁰

5. *Motivational interpretations.* Ratings, attitude types, and gratification lists are only the beginning of a conceptual line which ends in studies based on *broad motivational interpretations*. We cannot hope here to present systematically the ways in which psychologists distinguish between the different kinds of "drives" according to their range, depth, or the specificity of their relations to the world of objects.¹¹ The

⁸ Kurt Lewin, "Forces Behind Food Habits and Methods of Change," *The Problem of Changing Food Habits*, Bulletin of the National Research Council, Number 108, October 1943.

⁹ Herta Herzog, "On Borrowed Experience," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, 1941.

¹⁰ R. Wyant and H. Herzog, "Voting Via the Senate Mailbag," this *QUARTERLY*, 1941, 5, 590-624.

¹¹ Gordon W. Allport, "Attitudes," *Handbook of Social Psychology* (ed. C. Murchison), Worcester: Clark University Press, 1935, 798-844.

picture would not be complete, nevertheless, if we were to omit a mention of the use of the OI technique for the purpose of understanding people's reactions in such broad conceptual contexts.

The OI collects a variety of impressions, experiences, and sidelines which the respondent offers when he is asked to discuss a given topic. The man who does the study then makes a kind of psychological construction. He creates a picture of some basic motivation of which all these details are, so to speak, manifestations.

Consider an example. In studying certain groups of unemployed one makes a variety of observations: they walk slowly, they lose interest in public affairs, do not keep track of their time, express opinions only with hesitation, stop looking for jobs—in short, they can best be understood as discouraged, resigned beings whose psychological living space has been severely contracted. On the basis of this conceptualization we would not expect them, e.g., to join revolutionary movements which require initiative. If, on the other hand, we are interested in retaining whatever morale they do have left, we would reject the idea of a straight dole in favor of work relief which would keep them psychologically "on the go."

There is only a rather short step from this example to the kind of OI studies which we want to discuss. For a number of reasons most of them have been done in the field of advertising.

People who talk about their shoe purchases often mention how embarrassing it is to expose one's feet in stockings, how one is virtually a prisoner in the hands of the salesman, etc. They are also likely to point out that such-and-such a salesman was friendly, or that they do like stores where the customers are not seated too near each other. The study director finally forms the hypothesis that the shoe-buying situation is one likely to evoke a feeling of inferiority. To alleviate this feeling and thus lead to a larger and more satisfied patronage, a number of obvious suggestions can be made for the training of salesmen and the arrangement of the store.

Finally, take a series of OI's where women say that they like fruits in glass jars because then they can see the product and also because they feel there is greater danger of food spoiling in tin cans. The conclusion is not that lots of fruits in glass jars should be shown. A motivational interpretation which takes all the pertinent remarks in the OI's into consideration will rather proceed as follows. Glass jars have something

reassuring about them, whereas tin cans have a slight connotation of a dungeon in which the food and even oneself is jailed. The appropriate advertising for glass jars, therefore, would show them among flowers, in rays of sunshine, to stress the exhilarating elements in the whole complex. Visibility would then be only one of these elements.

To discuss this use of OI's in a short space is impossible, especially since its logic has not yet been thought through very well. The social scientist who tries to clarify such analysis faces a conflict between two goals to which he is equally devoted. On the one hand, these interpretations serve to integrate a host of details as well as make us aware of new ones which we might otherwise overlook; often they are very brilliant. On the other hand, they violate our need for verification because by their very nature they can never be proved but only made plausible. It is no coincidence that in the two examples given above we have added to each interpretation some practical advice derived from it. What such motivational analysis does is to see past experiences as parts of some psychological drive which can be reactivated by related material, be it propaganda or institutional devices.¹²

6. *Clarifying statistical relationships.* In the five areas outlined so far the OI was the point of departure for all subsequent analysis. Now finally we have to deal with studies where statistical results are available and where the OI serves to *interpret and refine statistical inter-relationships*. The procedure could be called the analysis of deviate cases.

When, for instance, the panic was studied which followed the famous broadcast on the "Invasion From Mars," it was found that people on a lower educational level were most likely to believe in the occurrence of the great catastrophe.¹³ Yet some lower-educated people were not frightened at all. When these deviate cases were subject to an OI, many turned out to be mechanics or people who had mechanical hobbies; they were accustomed to checking up on things, a habit the "regular" people had acquired by a successful formal education. On the other hand, quite a number of well-educated people were frightened. When an OI was made with them, the following was sometimes found: During the broadcast they had been in special social situations where it was not clear

¹² Rhoda Metraux, "Qualitative Attitude Analysis—A Technique for the Study of Verbal Behavior," *The Problem of Changing Food Habits*, Bulletin of the National Research Council, No. 108, October 1943.

¹³ Hadley Cantril, Herta Herzog, and Hazel Gaudet, *Invasion from Mars*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939.

who should take the initiative of checking up; the lack of social structure impeded purposeful action, and everyone got panicky.

Another example can be taken from unemployment studies. In general it is found that the more amicable the relations in a family prior to the depression, the more firmly would the family stand the impact of unemployment. Again we can inspect deviate cases. A couple fights constantly before the depression, but after the husband becomes unemployed, they get along better. A detailed interview reveals the probability that here the husband wanted to be submissive and the wife dominant, but folkways prevented them from accepting this inverse role. Unemployment, then, enforces a social situation here which is psychologically adequate. Or, a good marriage breaks down surprisingly quickly as a result of the husband's unemployment. A specification of the case shows that the man's sexual habits are rather vulnerable and become disorganized under the blow of the loss of his job.¹⁴

The general pattern of these studies proceeds from an empirical correlation which is usually not very high. We take cases which do not follow the majority pattern and try to gain an impression or to account for their irregularity. The political scientist is used to such procedure.¹⁵ He knows, for instance, that the more poor people and Catholics live in a given precinct of a big city, the more Democratic votes he can expect. But here is a precinct which qualifies on both scores, and still it went Republican. What accounts for this deviation? Is the Democratic machine inefficient? Has a special local grievance developed? Was there a recent influx of people with different political tradition? This is quite analogous to what we are trying to do when we are faced with individual cases which went statistically out of line. With the help of the OI we try to discover new factors which, if properly introduced, would improve our multiple correlation.

Usually the matter is put by saying that detailed case studies help us to understand an empirical correlation. This is quite all right as far as the psychology of the investigator goes. It would be more correct, however, to say that the OI helps to develop hypotheses as to the conditions under which you would expect our first correlation to become higher. If it were our task to formulate in general terms why the OI is so helpful to the better understanding of an attitude, our starting point would

¹⁴ Mirra Komarovsky, *The Unemployed Man and His Family*. New York: Institute of Social Research, 1940.

¹⁵ Harold F. Gosnell, *Getting out the Vote*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1927.

actually be here. We would have to make quite clear that the insight gained by a qualitative approach is nothing else than a hypothetical relation between a number of factors. But that would go beyond the purpose of this section, in which we intended to give no more than a vivid picture of the actual research experiences out of which the OI technique has grown. It is to the controversial aspect of the problem that we now turn.

THE ISSUE BECOMES A PROBLEM

The six areas just outlined could be looked at in two ways. For one, they represent desirable goals for public opinion research. We need more detailed knowledge as to what the answers of our respondents mean, on what specific points their opinions are based, in what larger motivational contexts they belong, etc. At the same time, the different applications of the OI also imply criticism to the effect that one straight poll question will hardly ever reach any of these goals successfully.

One can agree with this criticism without concluding that the OI technique is the only remedy. If this paper were written for a psychological journal, for instance, the course of our discussion from here on would be prescribed. We should have to compare results obtained by straight poll questions with those collected by OI's and decide which are preferable according to some adequate criteria. The present analysis, however, falls under the heading of "Research Policy." The research administrator has to make decisions as to the most desirable procedures long before we have provided all the necessary data on the comparative merits of different research methods.

What line of argument would one take in such a situation? No one can close his eyes to the shortcomings of many of the current opinion-poll practices. Having begun with the simple problem of predicting elections, they use, very often, a greatly oversimplified approach for the gauging of attitudes toward complex issues. We shall also agree that a well-conducted OI gives us a fascinating wealth of information on the attitude of a single respondent. When it comes to the statistical analysis of many OI's, the matter is already not so simple. It is in the nature of this technique that just the most valuable details of one OI become difficult to compare with the answers obtained in another interview. It can safely be said that the proponents of the OI technique have made much more progress in the conduct of the interviews than in their statistical analysis.

But even if the OI technique were not to have methodological troubles of its own, it would still be open to one very serious objection. It is necessarily an expensive and slow procedure and, as a result, studies which are made for practical purposes will always be based on a small number of cases. It is inconceivable at this moment that an agency would have the resources or the time to make many thousands of OI's on one subject. This is a decisive drawback. True, a surprisingly small number of cases is needed for a fairly correct estimate of how many Republicans there are in a community or how many people save their fat and grease. But do we want to stop here? Don't we want to know in which social groups some of those activities are more frequent than in others? Aren't we trying to account for the reasons why some people do a thing and others do not? And how can this be done except by careful cross-tabulation of one part of our data against other parts? And for this, a much larger number of cases is needed.

In other words, the OI technique, even if it were perfect in itself, places us in a dilemma. By laying all the stress on the detailed description of the single respondent's attitude, it forces us into relatively small numbers of interviews. This in turn handicaps another important progress in public opinion research: the progress which consists of comparing carefully the distribution of opinions in different sub-groups of the population and relating a given opinion to the personal characteristics and to other attitudes of the respondent.

From the standpoint of research policy, therefore, which is the standpoint taken in this paper, the whole problem comes to this. Is there not some way to use all the good ideas which the proponents of the OI technique have and still to develop methods which are more objective, more manageable on a mass basis—which, in short, give us sufficient material to do a thorough analysis of the factors which make for a given distribution of public opinion?

Under these aspects we shall go once more through the six areas discussed above. In each case we shall look for procedures which combine the administrative advantages of the straight poll question with the psychological advantages of the OI. Quite frankly we want to "eat our cake and have it, too." All folklore notwithstanding, research progress consists in the art of doing things which at first seem incompatible. As we proceed, it will turn out that these compromise techniques do not

make the OI superfluous but give it a new and, as we feel, more valuable place in the whole scheme of public opinion research.

To bring out more clearly our trend of thought, we begin with a little scheme. To the left we have our six areas; to the right we have short names for the procedures which would overcome some of the shortcomings of the straight poll question and still be more formalized and manageable on a mass basis than the OI.

*Current Applications
of the OI Techniques*

1. Clarifying the meaning of a respondent's answer
2. Singling out the decisive aspects of an opinion
3. Discerning influences
4. Determining complex attitude patterns
5. Interpreting motivation
6. Clarifying statistical relationships

*Possible Objective
Alternatives for the OI*

1. Interlocking system of poll questions
2. Check lists
3. None
4. Scales and typologies
5. Projective tests
6. None

It is to the short description and evaluation of the right side of the scheme that we now turn.

1. *Clarifying meaning by the use of interlocking poll questions.* In the first area we dealt with the clarification of the respondent's opinion. Did he know the significance of what he was talking about? In the course of an OI, by making the respondent elaborate in more detail, we will find out. But after all, the number of possible variations is not so great; it is often possible to get by explicit questions all the material we can use for comparative analysis of many interview returns.

Consider the following two cases. Studenski has pointed out that when people are asked whether they want lower taxes, most of them will say "yes."¹⁶ After having asked this general question, however, he then asked a series of specific questions on whether the government should discontinue relief, work projects, expenses for national defense, expenses for schools, police, etc. Respondents who wanted taxes reduced but services maintained had obviously, to say the least, an inconsistent attitude toward the problem.¹⁷ In a different context, Kornhauser has

¹⁶ Paul Studenski, "How Polls Can Mislead," *Harpers Magazine*, December 1939.

¹⁷ This is the technique which Henry Link used in a more recent study ("An Experiment in Depth Interviewing," this *QUARTERLY*, 1943, 7, 267-279). He first obtained a broad commitment on world participation for the post-war period from his respondents; then he asked a series of definite questions: for the sake of America's participation in world affairs, what would

pointed out the shortcomings of the question: Should Congress pass a law forbidding strikes in war industries or should war workers have the right to go on strike? Obviously there are other devices, such as an improved arbitration system or the endowment of union leaders with some semi-public power to keep their members from striking. By offering a whole set of such alternatives it is undoubtedly possible to get a much clearer picture of the respondent's real attitude.

In this and many similar examples the technique used consists of an *interlocking system of poll questions*, each of which is very simple but which through proper cross-tabulation permits the separation of respondents according to the extent to which they see the implications of their opinion.

Although we cannot go into details here, we have studied dozens of pertinent cases and are satisfied that for any given topic it is always possible to find an appropriate system of interlocking questions. The right procedure consists of beginning the study with a considerable number of very detailed OI's. These should come from different parts of the country and should serve to develop the structure of the problem. Experience shows that after one to three hundred such reports have been studied, very few new factors come up. At this point we can begin to develop a set of specific questions centering around the main attitude and bringing out its implications and qualifications. There is no reason why we should not ask specifically (by the use of ordinary poll questions) what knowledge and experience the respondent has in this field; what his opinions are in related fields; whether he does or does not expect certain things to happen; whether he has ever thought of the problem, or whether he cannot make up his mind about it, and so on.

Here we come across a very characteristic relationship between the OI and more formalized methods in opinion research. The OI serves as a source of observation and of ideas from which sets of precise poll questions can be derived which will be more manageable in the field and more susceptible to statistical analysis. On one occasion the useful suggestion was made that the special job of *converter* should be developed:

people be willing to accept? A standing army? Higher taxes? A lower standard of living? Etc. As a device to clarify the implications of people's opinions this is an appropriate procedure, but it is very confusing if it is suggested as a substitute for or even an improvement on the OI in all areas. It is precisely the purpose of the present paper to provide a general scheme, so that in discussing "depth interviews" *each participant can point to the specific sector of the entire field he has in mind.*

that people should specialize in studying OI's and seeing how they could be converted into systems of interlocking questions.

So far not enough thought has been spent on making this conversion procedure an explicit research operation for which standard examples and rules should be developed. Once this is done, it will probably turn out that in the area under discussion here the OI, although much preferable to isolated straight poll questions, is not so good as a well-structured set of straight poll questions. The proponents of the OI technique at this point usually see only the justified goal and the shortcomings of current public opinion polls. They have seldom the occasion to see in their own studies the hundreds of OI's which either do not yield really useful information or are so unique that if they are submitted to a comparative analysis, all the details which make them invaluable as a first phase of an investigation are lost when the final report is reached.

Sometimes when we want to clarify the meaning of an answer, especially in regard to qualifications, check lists can be considered an appropriate procedure. Since, however, check lists are more frequently indicated when it comes to the assessment of decisive features, they will be discussed under the next heading.

2. *Using check lists to get at the decisive aspects of an opinion.* If we want to know what people like about a candidate or what bothers them about the present rationing system, we can make a list of the probable answers and ask the respondents which answer fits their case.

The advantages and disadvantages of *check lists* have been repeatedly discussed. The minimum requirement is that they contain an exhaustive list of all the possibilities, for it is known that items not mentioned in a check list are less likely to be mentioned by the respondents. But even a good check list has certain dangers. If people are asked what wish they would make if they had a magic ring, they seldom mention "being very bright," because they do not think of intelligence as something that can be wished for. If, however, they get a check list of possible wishes which includes "intelligence," they are more likely to pick it. The less concrete the topic is, the more will the check list influence the answers.

As long as all this is not better explored by comparing the results from large-scale check lists and from the classifications of free answers, it is not possible to make a valid decision. Yet with the help of a careful analysis of OI's it seems logical to assume that exhaustive check lists can

be safely constructed—ones which would be as safe as the results of open-ended interviewing. For complex topics the cautious research student will, of course, be hesitant to rely too easily on check lists. When in doubt he will prefer to rely on OI's recorded by conscientious interviewers and classified by sensitive analysts for the study of decisive features.

In studying the decisive aspects of opinion there are cases where the more formalized alternative for the OI would not be a check list, but a system of interlocking questions. This is especially true in dealing with opinions on policy issues. Suppose people have expressed themselves on the idea of married women working in war industry and are opposed to it. The open-ended question, "Why do you feel this way?" brings out a variety of comments which show that people look at the matter from a number of aspects: some feel that it is bad for the home if women stay out too much; others feel that women are not equipped for factory work or that working conditions are not adequate for them; still others do not want women to compete with men for jobs. Here are four features of the whole problem on which respondents could be asked their opinions explicitly. Do you feel that women are equipped for war jobs? Do you feel that they are a competitive danger for men? Etc. By cross-tabulating the answers to the sub-issues against the main issue of women in war work, one probably would get a better idea of the general attitude pattern than if the "reasons" were directly tabulated.

Again the OI is indispensable in preliminary studies to give one an idea as to what aspects should be considered. If, however, a large number of interviews is to be collected, the interlocking system of questions might be preferable, especially if great effort is made to get an appropriate conversion of preliminary OI's into a system of more precise questions.

3. *Are there other ways of studying what has influenced opinion?* Whether it is possible to discern influences which are exercised upon people is a controversial question. In more extreme cases such decisions are obviously possible or impossible. If a child goes down to the grocer's "because my mother sent me down," we should consider such a statement as equivalent to a controlled experiment. Putting it rather exaggeratedly: if we set up two groups of well-matched children and had the mothers of the children in one group tell them to go to the grocer's, we should certainly expect to find more children from the "experimen-

tal" than from the control group at the grocer's. On the other hand, if a person has committed a crime and we ask him whether that is due to the fact that his parents immigrated to this country, we shall consider whatever he says not very reliable. The command of the mother is much more "discernible" as an influence than the whole background of family life.¹⁸

Fortunately, in public opinion research we are mostly interested in rather "discernible" influences. Whether people began to salvage paper under the influence of a government campaign or whether a specific pamphlet made them contribute blood to the Red Cross can be discovered fairly well by direct interviewing. For such studies the OI appears to be an important research tool. Thus, it becomes even more urgent to make its use as expert as possible. Sometimes it is not used wisely. Studies of the following kind have been circulated. People who began to can fruit were asked why they did so. Sixty per cent said "because of the campaign," 15% "because it is necessary for the war effort." Here is obviously a meaningless result—for OI or otherwise. Many of the 15% may have learned from the campaign that private canning was a patriotic duty. However, the interviewer was too easily satisfied with the first answer which came to the mind of the respondent instead of asking "Where did you learn that canning is important for the war effort?"¹⁹

We do not wish to discuss here under what conditions controlled experiments are possible and justified. Just for the record, we might add that the result of a controlled experiment does not necessarily indicate correctly the effectiveness of a real campaign. In a controlled experiment we expose some of the people artificially and may then find that they are strongly influenced by the campaign material. In real life people select themselves for exposure. It might well be that mainly those who are not affected by a radio speech are willing to listen to it. This is, for instance, one of the problems in educational broadcasting, where there is a wide difference between experimental and actual success of programs.

4. *Scales and typologies for the analysis of attitude patterns.* When it comes to the objective correlates for the use of the OI in the classifica-

¹⁸ E. Smith and E. Suchman, "Do People Know Why They Buy?" *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1940, 24, 673-684.

¹⁹ We find here a mistake which corresponds to the objection we voiced above against Henry Link's paper. Because he used interlocking questions in one area, he thought that he had shown the uselessness of the OI technique in all other areas. Many of the proponents of the OI, on the other hand, do careful interviewing for the description of attitudes; but when it comes to the discerning of influences, they do bad interviewing and subject their returns to poor classification.

tion of complex attitude patterns, we find ourselves in a peculiar situation. The topic has been a favorite one for social-research students; we have discussed "case studies" versus quantitative methods for a decade.²⁰ An appropriate instance comes from the study which this writer made during the presidential election of 1940. The task was to appraise how interested people were in the election. Had we used the OI technique, the interviewer would have talked with the respondent and by taking down what he said, by observing his participation in the discussion, he would have formed an opinion on his interest and then noted it in the form of a rating. Instead we asked the respondent three questions: whether he had tried to convince someone of his political ideas; whether he had done anything for the success of his candidate; and whether he was very anxious to see his candidate elected. Each respondent got a definite score according to how he answered the three questions.²¹

But how does such an objective scale compare with the impressionistic ratings obtained from an OI? The problems involved can best be explained by an example.

If in everyday life we call another person timid, we do so because of the way he walks or because of his hesitant speech and sometimes because of cues of which we are not precisely aware ourselves. In each case we use whatever cues the situation offers; they might be quite different from one case to the next. A "timidity rating," on the other hand, would provide us with a list of items on which an interviewer would have to get an observation for every case, if necessary by asking a direct question. The more timidity characteristics on this list applied to the respondents, the higher would be his timidity score. Using such a scale, the interviewer could not make use of incidental observations if they were not included in the list, even if in a special case he had a strong conviction that the respondent was much more timid than his scale value indicated.

All this can be directly applied to our problem. A good OI reproduces the full vividness of an actual observation; but if nothing characteristic happens in the interview situation or if the interviewer misses

²⁰ Paul Wallin, *Case Study Methods in the Prediction of Personal Adjustment* (ed., Paul Horst). New York: Social Science Research Council, 1941.

²¹ If such an interest score was used, it was found that for men the correlation between interest and voting was .20, whereas for women it was .50. Women, if they are not interested, do not vote. Men vote even if they are not interested, probably because they are more subject to social pressure. For a general theory of this score procedure see P. Lazarsfeld and W. Robinson, "Quantification of Case Studies," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1940, 24, 831-837.

cues, then we have little on which to base our final classification. With the scale we can count on a definite amount of data, but some of them might be rather artificial and often we must forego valuable observations within our reach. *Thus, a scale because of its rigidity will hardly be as good as an OI under its best conditions but can hardly let us down as much as an OI sometimes does.*

Sometimes we classify material not in a one-dimensional order but according to *types* of attitude, types of interest, or types of gratification. The objective tools for this purpose do not present problems which go beyond what we have said about the use of scales. Suppose, for instance, we want to classify people into three groups, according to whether they look at post-war problems mainly from a domestic-economic, a foreign affairs-peace, or a civil liberties-justice point of view. We would set up a number of questions and classify people according to the pattern of the answers they give. The standard example for such procedures can be found in Allport and Vernon's Study of Values Test.²² These psychologists took as a starting point Spranger's well-known personality types. People are characterized according to the values they are most concerned with: power, money, religion, beauty, wisdom, or personal contacts. In order to get to a formalized classification, the test asks people, for instance, what they look for first when they enter a living-room, what historical person they would be most interested in meeting, and so on. A respondent who looks at the books in the room first and who would like most to meet Einstein, etc., would be classified as an intellectual type.

In deciding whether such objective tests or an impressionistic classification based on an OI is preferable, one should keep in mind the fact that it is difficult to develop good test questions of this kind. Impressionistic classifications, even if they have methodological disadvantages, are more easily made in a *new* situation. One practical solution, therefore, might be to use OI's whenever a problem comes up only once. If we deal with recurring problems such as, for instance, people's eagerness to help in the war effort or their attitude toward our allies or toward government regulation of business, more explicit and standardized criteria for classification might be desirable.

²² Forms of the Allport-Vernon Value Test are distributed by the Psychological Corporation of New York.

There is also the possibility of trying a combination of both approaches. Taking once more the example of interest in the election, the interviewer might first ask standard questions of the type mentioned above; then he might continue the discussion and note any additional observations which might suggest a correction of the rigid score. Such procedures are often used when it comes to classifying people according to socio-economic status. It seems useful to classify people first according to the rental area of the city in which they live. Then, after the interviewer has talked with the respondent, seen how he dresses and how his living-room looks, he might make an impressionistic correction of the original score.

5. *Is there an easy way to get at motivation?* When we discussed broad motivational interpretations, we stressed all the hazards involved in this method. Correspondingly, it is very difficult to find an objective or formalized method for such an approach. *Projective tests* come nearest to it. The general idea of these tests is that people are presented with unstructured material. Here is a crying girl; other children are asked to guess why she is crying. Or, an inkblot is shown to some people, as in the Rorschach test, and they are asked to state what form it signifies to them. It is then assumed that the way people interpret such material, which has no definite meaning of its own, is indicative of what the people themselves are concerned with.²³

Applications to a public-opinion problem can only be invented because, to our knowledge, such studies have never been tried. If one wants to test people's attitudes toward public administration, one might, for instance, tell a short story of a successful public official who was suddenly dismissed. What was the reason? Was he found to be corrupt? Or was he the victim of a political intrigue? Or didn't he agree with the government's policy?

After Pearl Harbor, when so many people were concerned about the weakness of the American Navy, it would not have been easy to ask direct questions on this subject; few people would have cared to give an unpatriotic answer. One might, however, have shown them a series of pictures of battleships varying in degree of technical perfection. Which, in the opinion of the respondent, is an American and which a Japanese battleship? The proportion of people picking out the poor ship as an

²³ P. Symonds and W. Samuel, "Projective Methods in the Study of Personality" (Chap. VI of *Psychological Tests and Their Uses*), *Review of Educational Research*, 1941, 11, 80-93.

American model might have been a good index of the extent of concern about American armaments.

The psychological assumptions involved in a projective test have yet to be studied exhaustively. The answers are usually quite difficult to classify, and much depends upon the interpretation of the analyst. In the future such techniques may provide a very important tool for public opinion research. For the moment it can hardly be claimed that they are much better formalized than a good OI. If, therefore, one is interested in broad motivational interpretations, a well-conducted OI is probably still the best source for material.

6. *The meaning of statistical relationships.* Nothing has to be added to our discussion of the analysis of deviate cases in the preceding section. Here the OI is in its most legitimate place.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

If we now summarize briefly this critical survey of the OI technique, we can make a number of points as to its position in the general scheme of public opinion research.

We saw that the problem is not new. Since the beginning of social research, students have tried to combine the value of detailed qualitative applications with the advantages of more formalized techniques which could be managed on a mass basis.

We saw, furthermore, that a line along which such an integration could come about emerges. The OI is indispensable at the beginning of any study where it classifies the structure of a problem in all its details. It is also invaluable at the end of a study for anyone who is not satisfied with the mere recording of the low correlations we usually obtain. Good research consists in weaving back and forth between OI's and the more cut-and-dried procedures.

The *conversion* of OI's into sets of specific poll questions has shown up a new skill in our field and one which has found much too little attention.

The stress on this problem of conversion has revealed a weakness on both sides of the controversy. The proponents of the OI have successfully denounced the shortcomings of single straight poll questions, but by stressing so strongly the informality of the OI they have driven the poll managers to a defensive position, which is delaying the whole progress of opinion research. Field staffs are not equipped to make

difficult decisions in the course of the interview. However, the idea of *interconnected question sets* converted from preceding OI's shifts the weight of the problem from the field staffs to the central office. The attack should be directed against the directors of polls, who do not take the time and the effort to structuralize the problem and to devise the interlocking question structure which any well-trained field staff should be able to handle.

Concerning the classification of complex attitude patterns, another point can be made. Public opinion research has grown so quickly that much of the work is handled by people who do not know the history of social research in the last thirty years. Much valuable thinking and experimenting done in universities long before election results were predicted is immediately applicable to this new field. The construction of scales and the whole tradition of attitude measurement has developed its own logic, which can be profitably applied to the present controversy.

The same efforts have also opened up a considerable number of problems which have not yet been solved at all. The value of check lists, the use of projective tests, and the question of whether simple propaganda influences can be discerned by direct interview are characteristic examples. At all these points patient and painstaking work is needed. The solution of these problems will only be retarded if we let research administrators believe that they face different schools of research, whereas they deal only with different guesses as to what the final answers to these problems will be.

The hope might be expressed that this paper will not be regarded as an attempted judgment in the OI controversy. It tries to show that the problem consists of many different parts. For some problems the OI is indispensable; for others it is definitely wasteful. Often we do not really know the right answer. In these last cases the prudent administrator will do best to look for the *combination of methods* best adapted to the specific research task on hand.