Lesson 4:
The structured interview

1. The structured interview: basics

Structured interview: definition

"A structured interview, sometimes called a standardized interview, entails the administration of an interview schedule by an interviewer. The aim is for all interviewees to be given exactly the same context of questioning. This means that each respondent received exactly the same interview stimulus as any other. The goal of this style of interviewing is to ensure that interviewees’ replies can be aggregated and this can be achieved reliably only if those replies are in response to identical cues. Interviewers are supposed to read out questions exactly and in the same order as they are printed on the schedule. Questions are usually very specific and very often offer the interviewee a fixed range of answers (this type of question is often called closed, closed ended, pre-coded, or fixed choice). The structured interview is the typical form of interview in survey research."

(Bryman, p. 110)
Structured interview: Standardization and aggregation

Goal: Transformation of responses into numbers; aggregation of responses

Means 1: standardization of the question (and of its context)
- the same question for all participants
- fixed order of questions
- short, precise, one-dimensional question
- interviewers put questions in the same manner
- interviewers respond to questions of respondents in the same manner
- interviewers do not induce bias through their « way of being »

Means 2: standardization of responses
- response possibilities are given/fixed

Standardization: why important?

Why is the standardization of questions and responses so important?

Otherwise, we would not know if the variation in the responses are due to:
- differences between interviewees (« real variation »)
- differences between questions
- differences between response options
- differences between interview contexts

Basic idea: Finding true variability, reducing error variability

Basic idea: there is a « true variability » of the phenomenon that interests us in the « reality ». In order to measure this true variability, we try to reduce all possible « error variabilities » (due to context influences or translations of responses)

The means of reducing error variability is the standardization of questions, interview context and responses. If we do this, we can be sure that all found differences are due to « real » differences between respondents.

Structured interview: example 1

If you were to consider your life in general these days, how happy or unhappy would you say you are, on the whole...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very happy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly happy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very happy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all happy</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t choose</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ISSP Religion 2008
structured interview: example 2

please indicate which statement below comes closest to expressing what you believe about God

1. I don’t believe in God
2. I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t believe there is any way to find out
3. I don’t believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a higher power of some kind
4. I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others
5. While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God
6. I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it

non-structured questions: example 3

interviewer 1
if you were to consider your life in general these days, how happy or unhappy would you say you are, on the whole...

interviewer 2
what about your satisfaction, are you satisfied with your life?

interviewer 3
some people are really happy and have a lot of success, like, for example, Brad Pitt, others are really unhappy. How about you, are you happy?

non-structured responses: example 4

interviewer
if you were to consider your life in general these days, how happy or unhappy would you say you are, on the whole...

répondant 1
I am very happy. Oh yes. Very happy with my wife, and children, my work. Not with everything though, at work. My boss, I hate him. But you can’t have everything...

répondant 2
Hm, it depends on what you mean with « happy », I mean, I used to think I was happy when I was together with Lena, that was - well, it’s 20 years ago now, funny how time flies, anyway, we had a strange relationship, but I liked it....

structured interview: example 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>variable</th>
<th>I1</th>
<th>I2</th>
<th>I3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V1: Sex</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V2: Age</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V3: Social Status</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V4: Sympathy for Turcs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V5: Sympathy for Arabs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V6: Sympathy for Muslims</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V7: Traditionalism</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

V1 – V7 = Variables
I1 – I3 = Individuals
Conducting structured interviews

Conducting interviews (1): basics
- Know the interview well
- Introduce the survey in a standardized way; give the goal of the research; trustworthiness of the institution, guarantee of anonymity
- Be nice, but not too nice; show interest, but not too much interest.
- Create a « relationship » with the respondent (sympathetic detachment)

Conducting interviews (2): asking questions
- Put the question **exactly** as it is written; do not « tune it to the respondent »
- If the respondent asks: « in what sense »?
  - Do not explain the « meaning » of the question if it is an attitude question (if not otherwise instructed).
  - Say: how do you understand the question?

Conducting interviews (3): recording answers
- If the respondent wants to give several responses (where only one is allowed)
  - Say: what is the response closest to your view
- If the respondent seems to have forgotten the response possibilities:
  - enumerate again the response possibilities
3. Problems with structured interviews

Characteristics of interviewers

Attributes of interviewers that can have an influence on responses

- ethnicity
- gender
- attractiveness

The responses often go in the direction of "social desirability".

Characteristics of interviewers: example

"Schuman and Presser (1981) cite a study that asked respondents to nominate two or three of their favourite actors or entertainers. Respondents were much more likely to mention black actors or entertainers when interviewed by black interviewers than when interviewed by white ones."
(Bryman, p. 126)

Characteristics of interviewers: solution

Use different types of interviewers, men and women, not too attractive, not too unattractive, etc.
Response set

Definition:
Response set = "irrelevant but lawful sources of variance" (Webb et al. 1966: 19)

Response set - the problems

1. « Say yes »
   Certain individuals have the tendency to say yes to all or almost all questions.

2. « Feel examined »
   Certain individuals have the impression of finding themselves in an exam. They therefore try to find the "correct answer".

3. « Social desirability »
   Certain individuals choose responses they believe match what « society » or « people in general » or « the interviewer » think(s).

Response set: solutions

1. « Say yes »
   Use positive and negative questions

2. « Feel examined »
   Use questions that are non-directive. Use interviewers that do not present themselves as intellectuals

3. « Social desirability »
   Show that one can have different opinions on the subject.

Problem of "wrong categories"

It is possible that neither the questions nor the responses are important from the point of view of the respondent.

- s(he) puts other questions
- s(he) wants to give other responses

In qualitative research, we have better tools to deal with this. However, aggregation becomes more difficult and the translation into numbers becomes often impossible.