

Issues of Data Quality and Data Generation: The General Social Survey and Ethnomethodology/Conversation Analysis

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Ethnomethodology (EM) and conversation analysis (CA) may seem unlikely bedfellows with survey research but recent developments in both areas indicate otherwise. On the survey side, the possibility of digitally recording CATI interviews, as was done in the 2004 round of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS), means a low-cost way not only for storing raw interview data in the form of the talk transpiring between interviewers and respondents but also for enabling inquiries such as EM and CA that investigate structures of talk and collaborative practical actions. On the CA and EM side, there has long been a concern with how scientists, including social scientists, do their work. In the social sciences, such a concern dates to Garfinkel's inquiries regarding record-keeping, coding, interviewing, the use of evidence, and the like. The concern has always been with the "how" of these tasks and the social orderliness involved in accomplishing them.

More recent studies have especially deployed CA to study interaction in the survey interview and to analyze the "how" in terms of tacit and taken-for-granted practices or talk-based mechanisms by which participants—interviewers and respondents alike—assemble the data that emerges from their relatively brief and anonymous encounter. In connection with studying the "how," I invite the reader to consider three things. First is to explore a transcript illustrating practices of talk and interaction and how they affect administering a question and obtaining an answer. Second is the question of why the study of interaction matters to improving the quality of survey data. And third is to suggest the continued importance of possibilities for crossing the line between qualitative and quantitative research.

(1) An Illustration

Conversation analysis is concerned with the organization of interaction. There is an *interactional substrate* to the conduct of the interview whose properties can affect how well the interview is performed in the standardized way it is supposed to go. Anyone who has listened to an actual interview, for instance, knows that interviewers often depart from the script they are supposed to read, and sometimes this violates standardization. That interviewers do so often can be ascribed to their *skill* or *competence* as interactants rather than the lack professional expertise. Consider an example from the Current Population Survey, and specifically a question that asks what kind of enterprise the respondent's place of work is. (The respondent in this example works for an insurance company. Although we will consider subsequent talk as well, the focal question is at lines 4-5, and the answer of initial interest is at line 7 (FI = female interviewer; MR = male respondent):

CPS Interview 007c (Normalized transcript)

FI: And what kind of business or 1 industry is this?
2 MR: The insurance industry.
3 (7.0 seconds silence) ((typing))
4 ->FI: Is this business or organization mainly manufacturing retail trade
5 wholesale trade or something else.
6 (1.0)
7 ->MR: It's a service industry
8 (1.8)
9 FI: So it'd be under?
10 (2.0)
11 ->MR: Well it wouldn't- sh'wouldn't be manufacturing or retail or (0.9) or
12 anything like that it's (0.7) I don't know how- I don't know what
13 you'd (.) classify it.
14 ->FI: Under something else.=
15 MR: =Yeah:
16 (1.0)
17 FI: And what kind of work do you usually do at this job that is (.)
18 what is your occupation.

When the respondent, at line 7, answers the question, he does not choose one of the categories he has been given, and instead offers a new category. There are good interactional reasons for this answer. These reasons have to do with ways that listing things in talk conditions how a recipient processes a final item. Here the interviewer lists particular categories of business organizations, and ends with a generalized term. That way of listing can indicate to the respondent that, if the others do not apply, then he should name a category that does. That is, the practice here is that the respondent treats “or something else” as an *invitation* to complete the list with another, particularized category relevant to his situation, rather than as an utterance containing a response category in its own right that he can choose.

And now notice how the interviewer deals with the respondent's answer. He produces a probe at line 9, in a neutral way that fits the canons of standardized interviewing. This probe asks the R to use categories already mentioned rather than adding to them. So far, so good, except that at line 10, the respondent delays for two seconds, and, at lines 11-13 further indicates trouble with the question by denying the relevance of the categories so far named. In an expression of uncertainty, he announces that he doesn't know “how” or “what” the classification would be. To that characterization of the response we need to add an analysis about its fundamentally interactive character. In terms of *sequencing* in conversation, the turn is a practice called “reporting” that solicits guidance or help by implicating the relevance of its recipient gathering an upshot of the report. In other words, it invites the *interviewer* to produce a candidate answer; note how the interviewer at line 14 deals with the respondent's utterance by proposing one of the original categories as a possible answer. The respondent's agreement (“Yeah,” line 15) accepts the proposal and ends the verbal exchange such that the interviewer can record the answer (which is probably what the silence at line 16 indicates) and move on to the next question (lines 17-18).

(2) Why Interaction Matters to Improving the Quality of Survey Data

The example illustrates how interaction matters and how analysis of interaction can be consequential for survey design and implementation in at least two ways. For one, although there is a sophisticated literature on question wording, it is usually about semantics or how different words referring to the same thing can produce different response distributions. There is also a literature on “context effects” but that usually means the relation of an item on a questionnaire to preceding items. Conversation analysis examines words in relation to the very local sequential context of their production—their relation with other parts of an utterance, and also how an utterance is prospectively and not just retrospectively contextual. An utterance works as a social action to occasion a specific responsive action from its recipient. Research has yet to incorporate CA findings about talk to see how, in addition to being cognitive phenomena, different forms of questions operate as interactional items and, as such, may affect response distributions.

Another way that interaction matters for survey design and implementation can underline the matter of *competence* on the part of both interviewer and respondent and its effects on the data. In the example, if we were to focus only on the respondent’s hesitations and uncertainty in answering, he might be regarded as rather inept at parsing a straightforward question. What we know about conversation, however, suggests that he engages a practice that participants regularly use to solicit inferential upshots from their co-participants. The practice, as mentioned, is called *reporting* and it’s what we do, for example, when someone invites us to a movie and we say, “Sorry, I have to work tonight.” That is a report that solicits the inference from the inviter that the answer is “no.” Reports strongly compel responsive inferencing, and the recipient of a report may go beyond cognitive deduction to do what the interviewer does in the example, and that is to offer a candidate upshot for the speaker of the report to confirm. Once again, that is a matter of interactional competence. Interactional competence often runs up against and often takes precedence over acquired skills for official, standardized interviewing. It sometimes looks as if the interviewer is being unprofessional because of the departure from standardization—more concretely, in this instance she seems to be unskillful in the way she should do a neutral probe. But the interviewer here appears perfectly competent as a conversational participant. The point is that we need more investigations regarding how the tension between these two forms of competence or skill (interactional vs. standardized interviewing) affects data quality. When interviewers probe incorrectly, is it because they are prone to violate standardization, or are they giving precedence to interactional practices? If interviewers avoid doing the interactionally appropriate moves because they must follow procedure does this affect subsequent answering on the part of the respondent? For example, does it raise the frequency of item nonresponse? To be able to investigate such matters means obtaining audio or (preferably) video recordings of the interview and being able to study them with such tool sets as EM and CA.

(3) Crossing Over: Qualitative and Quantitative Research

Four years ago, NSF conducted a “Workshop on Scientific Foundations of Qualitative Research.” Qualitative researchers were called together and discussed, among other matters, the crossovers between qualitative and quantitative research—“hybrid” relationships, the “serious

use of both kinds of methods to analyze central processes” (rather than one being the handmaiden of the other), and spanning “case-oriented and variable-oriented” research.* In this crossover, the integrity of both kinds of research can be preserved. Such crossover research is important as an end in its own right and as a means toward addressing the fundamental problems of improving the quality of research of many kinds and in many domains. At Wisconsin, using the Wisconsin Longitudinal Survey and its digitized telephone interviews, we are engaging in collaborative hybrid studies both to better understand cognitive measurement and to find out what the effects on participation may be when taking into account conversational practices for soliciting participation while controlling for respondents’ propensity to engage in the interview. Crossing over is hard work but it can be facilitated by available technologies of recording that, in turn, allow for research on real and actual social processes and practices. By making hybrid, crossover, and case-oriented research more possible, the proposal for the GSS to continue its basic mission of gathering data on American society, comparing the U.S. to other societies, and making high quality data accessible to scholars and students, can be enhanced.

* See Charles C. Ragin, Joane Nagel, and Patricia White (2004). Workshop on Scientific Foundations of Qualitative Research. Sociology Program and Methodology, Measurement & Statistics Program in the Directorate for Social, Behavioral & Economic Sciences. On the web: <http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2004/nsf04219/nsf04219.pdf>