

# **Interviewing, Structured and Unstructured**

Department of Government  
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- 1 Participant Observation
- 2 Questionnaire Methods
  - Recall-type Questions
  - Evaluative Questions
  - Sensitive Topics
- 3 Elite Interviewing



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# 1 Participant Observation

## 2 Questionnaire Methods

- Recall-type Questions
- Evaluative Questions
- Sensitive Topics

## 3 Elite Interviewing

# “Field work”

- Any research activity outside the university setting
  - Textual or archival searches
  - Interviews (structured or unstructured)
  - Focus groups
  - Participant observation
  - Some mix of these
- Term is agnostic about approach, theory, and method
- Might be one-off, sporadic, or long-term

# Participant Observation

- Definition: “Participant observation is a research strategy whereby the researcher becomes involved in a social situation for the purpose of understanding the behaviour of those engaged in the setting. . . The outcome of the research is a detailed account of the activities and behaviour of those involved.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>p.265 from Burnham et al. 2008. *Research Methods in Politics*. 2nd Edition. Palgrave.

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- Typically does not generate DSOs

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- 5 Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter. 1956. *When Prophecy Fails*. Harper.



# Four Ideal Types<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Complete participant
- 2 Participant as observer
- 3 Observer as participant
- 4 Complete observer

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<sup>2</sup>Gold, R. 1958. "Roles in Sociological Field Observation." *Social Forces* 36(3): 217-23.

# Complete participant

- Participate without disclosing observer/researcher role
- Essentially covert (“being undercover”)
- May be useful in sensitive domains
- Raises ethical concerns

# Participant as observer

- Participate, but not fully
- Retain explicit observer role
- Negotiate exact role in the situation and access to group members and information

# Observer as participant

- Essentially interviews
- Limited time frames
- Note: Sometimes seen as indistinguishable from “complete observer”

# Complete observer

- Purely observer role; no participation
- Still requires negotiated access in many cases, but may not require the same types of consent as participant roles
- Easier to keep a distance and avoid “rapport” with group members

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- How does being an observer change your interpretation of events?

# **Ethnography vs. Journalism**

What's the difference?

# Focus Groups

- Definition: “A discussion among a small number of members of a target population, guided by a moderator.”<sup>3</sup>
- A descriptive bridge between interviewing and ethnography
  - Less structured than an interview
  - More structured than participant observation
  - Typically brief (1-2 hours)

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<sup>3</sup>Groves et al. 2009. *Survey Methodology*. 2nd Edition. Wiley.



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  - Evaluative Questions
  - Sensitive Topics
- 3 Elite Interviewing

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- May generate DSOs
- May generate other kinds of descriptions

# Topics of questions

- Recall
  - Behaviour
  - Knowledge and beliefs
  - Perceptions
  - Demographics
  
- Evaluation
  - Opinions

# Structure of a question

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- 1 Survey mode

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- 5 Response format and options
- 6 Follow-ups, branches, checks, validation, clarification

# Questions as Operationalization

- Questionnaires start with concept definition
- Multiple ways to operationalize any concept
- Important concepts may require multiple measures
- Question should measure concept of interest

# Problem Set 4

- Work as class groups to conduct a “pilot” study
- Use a Eurobarometer survey of your choice
- Conduct in-person interviews
- Evaluate process of collecting interview data

# Evaluating a questionnaire

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- How long does it take to read and answer this question?



# Cognitive interviewing methods

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- Retrospective think-alouds
- Paraphrasing
- Definitions
- Probes
- General discussion/evaluation

# Recall-type Questions

- Knowledge
- Behaviour
- Events

# Recalling Knowledge

- Factual items with “true” responses
  - Political knowledge
  - Knowledge about products/services
  - General knowledge
- How do we deal with “don't know” responses?
  - Genuine expression of lack of knowledge?
  - Insufficient time to think?
  - Question was unclear/ambiguous?

# Recalling Behaviours

- Things respondent did in the past
  - Media use
  - Eating/dietary habits
  - Past voting
- Challenging to measure accurately
- Can (sometimes) be easily validated

# What affects responses to recall questions?

- Question misunderstanding
  - Vague concepts
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## What affects responses to recall questions?

- Question misunderstanding
  - Vague concepts
  - Confusing or long wording
- Forgetting
- Recency/primacy biases among responses
- Motivated misreporting
- Reference period ambiguity
- Rare events
- True “don’t know” responses

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- Intentionally giving an incorrect response
  - Applies to recall and evaluative questions
- Several common biases
  - Social desirability bias
  - Acquiescence bias
  - Demand characteristics



# Evaluative questions

- Name an object of evaluation
- Possibly describe that object
- Ask for a transformation of the evaluation onto a set of responses



# Question templates

- Ratings
  - Several varieties of rating scales
- Scales/Thermometers
- Agree-disagree
- Forced choices
- Open-ended
- Rankings (note: need alternatives to rank against)

# Additional Considerations

- How many response categories?
- Middle category (presence and label)
- “no opinion” and/or “don’t know” options
- Probe if “no opinion” or “don’t know”?
  - Encourage guessing?
  - Clarify/describe object of evaluation?
- Branching format?

# Activity Example

- Public opinion survey in Great Britain
- Construct: Opinion toward UK involvement in air strikes on Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria
- Think about strengths and weaknesses of each question

## Example: Rating (bipolar)

Do you support or oppose Great Britain's participation in U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria?

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

# Example: Rating (branching)

Do you support or oppose Great Britain's participation in U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria?

- Support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Oppose

## Example: Rating (branching)

Do you support or oppose Great Britain's participation in U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria?

- Support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Oppose

Would you say that you strongly [support—oppose] or somewhat [support—oppose] Great Britain's participation?

- Strongly
- Somewhat

## Example: Rating (bipolar)

Are you favourable or unfavourable toward Great Britain's participation in U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria?

- Very favourable
- Somewhat favourable
- Neither favourable nor unfavourable
- Somewhat unfavourable
- Strongly unfavourable

## Example: Rating (unipolar)

To what extent do you support Great Britain's participation in U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria?

- Strongly
- Moderately
- Somewhat
- Not at all



## Example: Rating (unipolar)

How favourable are you toward Great Britain's participation in U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria?

- Extremely favourable
- Very favourable
- Moderately favourable
- Somewhat favourable
- Not at all favourable

## Example: Numbered Scale

On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being “strongly oppose” and 5 being “strongly support,” to what extent do you support Great Britain’s participation in U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria?

1 Strongly oppose

2

3

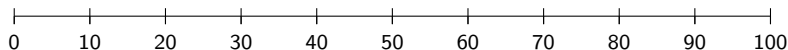
4

5 Strongly support

## Example: Thermometer

We would like to get your feelings toward some of political policies. Please rate your support for the policy using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favourable and warm toward the policy. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favourable toward the policy. You would rate the policy at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly favourable or unfavourable toward.

Great Britain's participation in U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria.



## Example: Agree/Disagree (bipolar)

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I support Great Britain's participation in U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

## Example: Agree/Disagree (unipolar)

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I support Great Britain's participation in U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria.

- Agree completely
- Agree to a large extent
- Agree to a moderate extent
- Agree a little bit
- Agree not at all

## Example: Forced choice

When thinking about Great Britain's participation in U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, which of the following comes closer to your opinion:

- Great Britain should participate in air strikes
- Great Britain should not participate in air strikes

## Example: Open-ended

In your own words, how would you describe your opinion on Great Britain's participation in U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria?





# Sensitive Questions

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- Definition: Topics “seen as intrusive or embarrassing”
- Factors affecting topic sensitivity
  - Individual differences
  - Mode
  - Interviewer
  - Survey context
  - Survey sponsorship
  - Perceived privacy

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- Definition: Topics “seen as intrusive or embarrassing”
- Factors affecting topic sensitivity
  - Individual differences
  - Mode
  - Interviewer
  - Survey context
  - Survey sponsorship
  - Perceived privacy
- Why do we care?

# **Sensitive Questions Activity**

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# Sensitive Questions Activity

- 1 To the nearest \$1,000, what is your parents' total household income?
- 2 Have you ever stolen anything from a current or former employer?
- 3 When was the last time you had unprotected sex?
- 4 During today's lecture, how much time have you spent on your computer on things unrelated to this course?



# Eliciting Sensitive Answers

- Ensure privacy, anonymity, or confidentiality
- Change modes
- Indirect measures
- Provide population base rates
- Placement in survey instrument



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# Elite Interviewing

- Rules of questionnaire design style apply
- Unique challenges/opportunities:
  - Time constraints
  - Guarantees of anonymity?
  - Public information may be available
  - Often exempt from research ethics review

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- “Structured” interviews
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  - Often, closed set of response categories

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- “Structured” interviews
  - Strict order of questions
  - Questions are precisely worded
  - Often, closed set of response categories
  
- Elite interviews often “semi-structured”
  - Greater use of open-ended questions
  - More flexible ordering of questions
  - More respondent-driven

