

Foreword

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Asking and answering questions are the core elements of survey research. Nevertheless, the field has long been characterized by a science of sampling on the one hand and an “art of asking questions” on the other hand. Aiming to turn that art into a science, psychologists and survey methodologists brought theories of language comprehension, communication, memory, and judgment to bear on the survey response process, resulting in an interdisciplinary research area that became known as CASM—cognitive aspects of survey measurement. This work illuminated the interplay between semantic and pragmatic aspects of asking and answering questions and showed that even apparently “clear” and “simple” questions can dramatically change in meaning depending on who asks whom and in which context. These complexities at the interface of semantics, pragmatics, and social context are compounded when researchers and respondents do not share the same cultural background, use different languages, or both.

If the researcher is lucky, pretest respondents will complain about “bad” questions or provide answers that are sufficiently odd to indicate a problem. But such lucky discoveries of complications related to culture and language are not necessarily the norm. More likely, participants will construe a meaning that is subjectively plausible in their own cultural and language context and provide answers that do not raise any flags. Unfortunately, those answers may be answers to questions that the researchers did not intend to ask or did not intend to ask in that form. Failing to notice this, researchers are likely to interpret all answers as responses to the same substantive question and may interpret differences between groups as differences in opinion and behavior rather than differences in question interpretation. As cognitive research showed, all of these problems can arise in surveys within a single country, conducted in the same language. However, they are compounded in cross-national and cross-cultural research, where researchers may translate questions from another culture without full awareness of culture-specific connotations and differences in pragmatic meaning or complications arising

from administering the survey in the temporary context of culturally significant holidays or commemorations of sacred events. Such differences are particularly difficult to notice when research teams collect data within their own culture without being exposed to the issues arising during data collection in other cultures.

This book provides ample illustrations of these and related complexities and identifies ways to address them. The contributions range from integrative reviews to reports of novel findings and solutions. They highlight the importance of language issues for data quality, provide frameworks for conceptualizing the underlying processes, present diverse methods for identifying problems at an early stage, and illustrate and evaluate potential solutions in the form of improved translation and pretesting procedures. We congratulate the editors and authors on this stimulating volume and are delighted that their collaboration emerged from a workshop we taught at the 74th Conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research in Toronto, Canada. We look forward to the new wave of research emerging from the stimulating ideas presented in this volume.