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SENSITIVE QUESTIONS IN SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY

"The protective system of our psyche, [...] its camouflage, turns our relations with others into a dialogue of the deaf". 

R. Pinto, M. Gravitz, Methodes des Sciences Sociales

In spite of their promising nature, all attempts at abolishing the fundamental in sociology division of research situation into the subject (researcher) and the object (respondent) by introducing symmetric techniques of the "dialogue method" type have, so far, left the methodological orthodoxy intact. The sociological survey, with its characteristic asymmetry of the process of communication between interviewer and respondent is still a dominating method of data collection. It is my view that this asymmetry comes from the fact that the respondent in our society is culturally unaccustomed with interview situation, and that he is most often made to talk to the interviewer of things he has never considered before.

The present paper analyses a particular type of questions which augment the asymmetry of communicative process in survey, due to a feature called "sensitiveness". According to the Polish Language Dictionary "sensitiveness" denotes this feature of a subject, topic or problem which "may lead to irritation, disagreement, and..."

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It remains to be determined whether the feature in question has been subjected to satisfactory investigation in methodological literature, and whether the present state of knowledge on the subject suffices to help the researcher avoid irritation in standardized interviews.

We all know from our research experience that even in surveys conducted in a friendly atmosphere there are questions which provoke nervousness and anxiety in the respondent. His behaviour and his attitude towards the interview suddenly change. He refuses to give answers and starts to comment on questions by saying "What are you asking this for?", "No, that's unnecessary question..." etc. The transfer of information between two partners, so far proper and desirable with regard to the purpose of research, becomes disturbed. There appear obstacles in the interview which may be generally defined as psychological problems.

In discussing the state of methodological literature I should like to observe that there exist studies which deal with questions whose contents provoke uneasiness, embarrassment or anxiety in the respondent, i.e. ones that trigger off a complex of mental processes which disturb, or even preclude, communicative process. We must note as well, however, that all of these studies are fragmentary and common-sense investigations.

To begin our discussion, there is a surprising diversity of terms used for this type of questions:

1) embarrassing questions
2) disconcerting questions (question qui gêne)
3) sensitive questions
4) delicate questions (question délicate)
5) traumatising questions (question traumatisans)

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3 W. H y m a n, Interviewing in Social Research, Chicago 1952, p. 212.
7 Pinto, Garvits, op. cit., p. 690.
6) threatening questions
7) indiscreet questions (question indiscreté)

A similar diversity of terms appears in connection with the character of problems to which these questions refer:
1) sensitive topics
2) topics which are generally taboo
3) embarrassing information
4) threatening information.

In our investigations we should therefore seek answers to certain fundamental problems. Which questions have the particular potential for provoking negative emotional states (shame, anxiety, fright, suspiciousness, aggression etc.) in the respondent? Is the sensitive character of questions a constant feature, independent of the socio-cultural system, or, on the contrary, substantially dependent on certain essential features of the socio-cultural system within which the sociological research is conducted? In other words: Can the "sensitiveness" of questions be considered as non-relative or a relative (i.e. one which occurs only in the analysis of relations between the socio-cultural system and the social situation of survey) feature?

A superficial analysis of methodological handbooks is sufficient to prove that their authors are apt to treat "sensitiveness" as an absolute feature and think it unnecessary to refer in their analyses to the essence of social systems. Let us quote some characteristic statements. Analysing causes of certain failures of sociological surveys a French methodologist, R. Daval says: "Questions relating to religion, politics, sex and finances may be regarded as sensitive." A similar stand is taken by two other

8 Richardson, Dohrenwend, Klein, op. cit., p. 50.
9 Hyman, op. cit., p. 212.
11 Ibidem., p. 147.
12 Daval, op. cit., p. 146.
13 Pinto, G r a v i t a, op. cit., p. 693.
14 Daval, op. cit., p. 146.
French authors S. Pinto and M. Gravita who write in their handbook: "Certain topics may have an embarrassing aspect, e.g., religious, sexual and political issues, or questions related to social problems". In such cases questions like "Do you go to church?", or "Which party do you belong to?" entail a risk of provoking not only false answers, but also embarrassment and perplexity in the respondent, or even in the interviewer himself, and thereby may interfere with the further course of interview. In the first part of their handbook a hint can be traced, that its authors are aware of some socio-cultural conditions of the role of the respondent in survey: "a question should never place the respondent in a situation where he must give socially unacceptable answers". At this point, however, the authors unfortunately drop this interesting train of thoughts and we remain uninstructed as to the nature of the "social unacceptability" of answers.

A similar approach to the problem of sensitiveness can be found in American handbooks. R. Richardson, B. Dohrenwend and D. Klein, authors of the handbook "Interviewing, Its Forms and Functions" state the following:

"Threatening or taboo subjects are usually defined as those subjects that are personal, intimate, and not generally topics of public conversation - e.g., sex, religion, or financial status. A somewhat broader view of a threatening subject defines it as any area in which respondent cannot know his status as compared to others because the subject is rarely discussed in public. Since he cannot be certain of the norms, the respondent is reluctant to give information because it may depict him as deviating from norms.

Similarly, even a subject that is publicly discussed may be threatening to a respondent who believes that his own views or practices are deviant or status reducing."

A number of other authors have also paid attention to the problem of realization through survey of one of the fundamental social expectations - the need of social recognition and of behaviour according to social norms - which clearly emerges from our present considerations. C. Cannel and H. Kahn warn researchers against situations in which answers demanded to survey questions

15 Pinto, Gravita, op. cit.
16 Richardson, Dohrenwend, Klein, op. cit., p. 72.
constitute a substantial threat to the respondent's "ego": "no
question should confront the respondent with the necessity of gi-
ving a socially unacceptable response". And next: "Offering a ran-
ge of responses which meets the respondent's criteria of social
acceptability is necessary to good question formation. A broader
statement might be that the question must never constitute a threat
to the respondent's ego. Such a threat may be introduced if the
respondent is required to give an answer which he feels is social-
ly unacceptable, or it might come about if the respondent is placed
in a position where he feels less well informed than he should
be".17

The views quoted above made me include in this analysis of
sensitive questions yet another, extremely important, though still
underrated, element. It seems that sensitiveness cannot be asso-
ciated solely with religious, political, and sexual issues. In
fact, all questions may become sensitive, especially those which,
for various reasons, may be too difficult for the respondent. It
is best evidenced by the peculiar character of the so-called 'theo-
retical language of sociology'. Due to a diversity of conceptual
schemes in sociology, and their purely abstract character, there
appear in survey questionnaires certain linguistic representations
of social reality which can hardly be accepted by a sociologist,
let alone the respondent. It seems that Kahn and Cannel had in
mind precisely this sort of difficulties in sociological research,
when they warned social researchers, to no effect as yet, in the
following words:

"The importance of asking questions appropriate to the respon-
dent's level of information, and not productive of respondent
embarrassment, does not necessarily limit us to asking questions
to which every respondent knows the answer. It does mean, however,
that caution in wording questions must be used when we anticipate
that a considerable proportion of respondents will not be in
possession of answer [...]"

The problem is sometimes referred to as expert error — that
is, the error of ascribing to the respondent a degree of expert-
ness in a particular field which he does actually possess".18

17 Ch. C a n n e l, B. K a h n, The Collection of Date by
Interviewing, [in:] L. Pe s t i n g e r, D. K a t s (eds.), Re-
18 Ibidem, p. 345.
In situations where survey questions are not adjusted to the respondent's intellectual abilities, his level of knowledge and social experience, or his specific perception of the social world, the interview situation may generate a meaningful disturbance in the respondent's image of self, and in his self-evaluation.

To finish this part of the paper it is necessary to point out a Polish "differentia specifica" which is discussed at length by I. Przybyłówksa and K. Kietelski in their paper which could be given a sub-title: "The Social Context of Questionnaire Interview" given a sub-title: "The Social Context of Questionnaire Interview". Basing on an empirical study by Gisa and Worotyńska ("The Social Context of Questionnaire Research") they have observed in answers of Polish respondents that sociology and sociological research are very strongly associated with the State, its institutions and its system of authority. This empirically documented hypothesis (1979) of perception of sociological research in permanent connection with an omnipresent center of political power (the State), typical of Polish respondents, is confirmed by earlier research by Lutyńska (clerks) and Slomczynski (intelligentsia) and Gostkowski (peasants). All these studies point to the fact that in the Polish society there are two important factors which augment sensitiveness in sociological surveys. They are:

1. A specific perception of the role of interviewer as a representative of one of the numerous state institutions, i.e. a projection of a relation: "institution - controlled citizen" onto the situation of interview.

2. Stereotypical and foggy ideas of most Polish respondents of institutions in their wide, socio-political context, and of institutional sanctions directed at those who are critical of their work.

19 I. Przybyłówksa, K. Kietelski, The Social Context of Questionnaire Interview, The article was published in this volume.


It seems that this behaviour of respondents in Polish sociological studies (let alone the question of negative social experience stored in common-sense consciousness) finds a partial explanation in "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" by Б. Goffman:

"When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. [...] Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. [...] If unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to him."

All so far presented concepts of "question sensitiveness" have thus been found as inadequate. Before I present my own conception of "sensitiveness" I should like to propose a general definition. By a "sensitive question" I understand any question which, due to external features of the socio-cultural system, and internal features of the respondent, generates in him certain negative emotional processes (shame, anxiety, fright) which make him unable to give answers, or make him supply answers which are insincere.

Therefore, in speaking of "sensitiveness" we must always take into consideration parameters of the socio-cultural system, the interview situation, and the respondent's personality.

"Sensitiveness" occurs in survey whenever:

1. A question deals with, in respondent's problems opinion, constitute his sphere of intimacy. Consideration of these problems is his sole prerogative; in principle they are not intended for verbalisation in the presence of others, especially of strange individuals. This characteristic segmentation of personality into a sphere of intimacy and a sphere of public relations has been stressed by many psychologists. The problem in stated with particular clarity in "The Structure of Personality" by J. Nuttin.

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The author refers to the theory of "social mask" according to which masks are utilized in contacts with others with the intention of protecting one's "intimate inside" from threats of the external world. It appears that "social masks" are put on most often by people living in these social systems in which expression of own individuality and spontaneity is not the most highly regarded social value. The sphere of intimate personality includes also topics which are cultural taboo. If there exists in the society a cultural norm which condemns public conversations on "taboo" topics, then it may be strongly internalized by the respondent and, consequently, constitute an important factor of his sphere of intimacy.

2. A question is a threat for the respondent's self-esteem because:
   a. An answer contradicting generally accepted social norms may put him under a charge of disregarding these norms. The anticipated disapproval of the interviewer is identified with negative evaluation on the part of the society (society as a whole). It is thus not possible to expect with any probability that in the course of interview the respondent will admit having opinions or behaving in a way which is socially disapproved. Instead, we may expect that he will try to avoid "incriminating" answers in hope of establishing some accordance of his behaviour, attitudes and experiences with social norms which regulate the behaviour of people in his socio-political frame of reference. This statement seems to be especially well-founded in relation to sociological research conducted in the so-called "monocentric system" (S. Ossowski).
   b. A question is too difficult for the respondent and he feels to be less well informed than he should be. He perceives his inability to give answer as a failure which discredits him and ridicules in the eyes of the interviewer (or, worse, still, in the presence of his family), and hence it violates the sub-system of his convictions relating to own person.
   c. A question constitutes (in the respondent's opinion) a threat to his social existence, because a sincere answer may expose him to formal and informal sanctions on the part of some institutions. It refers especially to cases in which the respondent defines the interview situation as a means of evaluation by one or another institution. It should be remembered that in such cases...
the interviewer is perceived as related to some "office" equipped with negative sanctions. Given such attitudes of the respondent to the interview situation, questions become signals of an external threat which can be properly avoided by shunning answers.

I have frequently mentioned in this paper threats perceived by Polish respondents. These threats are localised in certain features of our socio-political system. In order to avoid misunderstanding I want to state explicitly that it is of no importance what are the actual features of the system. According to the general thesis of sociology of knowledge, only these social experiences are meaningful which result from past historical form and which are still stored in the common-sense knowledge of respondents.

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PYTANIA DRĄżLIWE W BADANIU SOCJOLEGICZNYM

Autor podejmuje analizę wybranej klasy pytań, które pojawiają się w wywiadach kwestionariuszowych, a mianowicie tzw. pytań drażliwych. Są to te pytania, których następowaniem jest poczucie zakłópotania bądź zagrożenia u respondentów. Artykuł zawiera typologię pytań drażliwych uwzględniającą zróżnicowane niekorzystne odwrotne reakcje respondentów na nie wywołane.