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SENSITIVE QUESTIONS IN SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY

> "The protective system of our psyche,
> [...] its camouflage, turns our re-
> lations with others into a dialogue
> of the deaf".
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> 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 introdu-
cing symetric techniques of the "dialogue method" type have, so
far, left the methodological orthodoxy intact[1]. The sociological
survey, with its characteristic asymmetry of the process of commu-
nication 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
unacquainted 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 Lan-
guage Dictionary "sensitiveness" denotes this feature of a subject,
topic or problem which "may lead to irritation, disagreement and

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[1] P. Ł u k a s i e w i c z, Dialog jako metoda badawcza, [in:]
A. S i c i ń s k i (ed.), Problemy teoretyczne i metodologiczne
badań stylu życia, IFiS PAN, Warszawa 1980, p. 75-95.

conflict"[2]. It remains to be determined whether the feature in
question has been subjected to satisfactory investigation in me-
thodological literature, and whether the present state of knowled-
ge on the subject suffices to help the researcher avoid irrita-
tion in standarized interviews.

We all know from our research experience that even in surveys
conducted in a friendly atmosphere there are questions which pro-
voke 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 pro-
per 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 frag-
mentary and common-sense investigations.

To begin our discussion, there is a surprising diversity of
terms used for this type of questions:
   1) embarrassing questions[3],
   2) disconcerting questions (question qui gêne)[4],
   3) sensitive questions[5],
   4) delicate questions (question délicate)[6],
   5) traumatising questions (question traumatisante)[7],

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[2] Słownik języka polskiego, vol. I, PWN, Warszawa 1978, p. 449.

[3] H. H y m a n, Interviewing in Social Research, Chicago 1952,
p. 212.

[4] R. P i n t o, M. G a r v i t z, Methodes Des Sciences So-
ciales, vol. II, Dalloz, Paris 1964, p. 693-698.

[5] S. R i c h a r d s o n, B. D o h r e n w e n d, D. K l e i n,
Interviewing - its forms and functions, New York 1965, p. 49.

[6] R. D a v a l, Traité de Psychologie Sociale, Paris 1963,
p. 146; P i n t o, G r a w i t z, op. cit., p. 693, 681.

[7] P i n t o, G r a w i t z, op. cit., p. 690.

6) threatening questions[8],

7) indiscreete questions (question indiscrète)[9].

A similar diversity of terms appears in connection with the character of problems to which these questions refer:

1) sensitive topics[10],

2) topics which are generally taboo[11],

3) embarrassing information[12],

4) threatening information[13].

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"[14]. A similar stand is taken by two other

[8] R i c h a r d s o n, D o h r e n w e n d, K l e i n, op. cit., p. 50.

[9] H y m a n, op. cit., p. 212.

[10] Ch. C a n n e l l, R. K a h n, The Dynamics of Interviewing, John Wiley and Sons, New York 1957, p. 144-148.

[11] Ibidem, p. 147.

[12] D a v a l, op. cit., p. 146.

[13] P i n t o, G r a v i t z, op. cit., p. 693.

[14] D a v a l, op. cit., p. 146.

French authors R. Pinto and M. Gravitz who write in their handbook:
"Certain topics may have an embarrassing aspect, e.g. religious,
sexual and political issues, or questions related to social pro-
blems". 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 situa-
tion where he must give socially unacceptable answers"[15]. 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 Func-
tions" 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"[16].

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 beha-
viour according to social norms - which clearly emerges from our
present considerations. C. Cannel and R. Kahn warn researchers
against situations in which answers demanded to survey questions

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[15] P i n t o, G r a v i t z, op. cit.
[16] R i c h a r d s o n, D o h r e n w e n d, K l e i n, op.
cit., p. 72.

constitute a substantial threat to the respondent's "ego": "no question should confront the respondent with the necessity of giving a socially unacceptable response". And next: "Offering a range 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 socially unacceptable, or it might come about if the respondent is placed in a position where he feels less well informed than be 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 associated 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 "theoretical 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 respondent'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 expertness in a particular field which he does actually possess"[18].

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[17] Ch. C a n n e l, R. K a h n, The Collection of Date by Interviewing, [in:] L. F e s t i n g e r, D. K a t z (eds.), Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences, London 1954, p. 346.

[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 lenght by I. Przybyłowska and K. Kistelski in their paper which could be given a sub-title: "The Social Contex of Questionnaire Interview" given a sub-title: "The Social Contex of Questionnaire Interview"[19]. Basing on an empirical study by Giza 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)[20], Słomczyński (intelligentsia)[21] and Gostkowski (peasants)[22]. 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.

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[19] I. P r z y b y ł o w s k a, K. K i s t e l s k i, The Social Contex of Questionnaire Interview, The article was published in this volume.

[20] K. L u t y ń s k a, Refleksje metodyczne o wywiadach z urzędnikami w Łodzi w latach 1960-1961, [in:] Analizy i próby technik badawczych w socjologii, vol. I, Ossolineum, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1966, p. 225-256.

[21] K. S ł o m c z y ń s k i, Wpływ oficjalnej i prywatnej sytuacji wywiadu na wypowiedzi respondentów w środowisku inteligencji, [in:] Analizy i próby..., p. 187-223.

[22] Z. G o s t k o w s k i, Z zagadnień socjologii wywiadu, "Studia Socjologiczne" 1961, no. 2.

It seems that this behaviour of respondents in Polish socio-
logical studies (let alone the question of negative social expe-
rience stored in common-sense consciousness) finds a partial ex-
planation in "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" by E. Gof-
fman:

"When an individual enters the presence of others, they com-
monly 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 ex-
pect 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 simi-
lar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested
stereotypes to him"[23].

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 fea-
tures of the respondent, generates in him certain negative emotio-
nal 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 intimmacy. Consideration of these pro-
blems is his sole prerogative; in principle they are not intended
for verbalization 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 parti-
cular clarity in "The Structure of Personality" by J. Nuttin[24].

[23] E. G o f f m a n, The Presentation of Self in Everyday
Life, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971, s. 13.
[24] J. N u t t i n, Struktura osobowości, PWN, Warszawa 1968,
p. 249-251.

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 expected that he will try do 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.

3. 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" equiped 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 shuning answers.

I have frequently mentioned in this paper threats perceived by Polish respondents. These threats are localized in certain featu- res of our socio-political system. In order to avoid misunderstan- ding I want to state explicitely 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.

Andrzej Rostocki

PYTANIA DRAŻLIWE W BADANIU SOCJOLOGICZNYM

Autor podejmuje analizę wybranej klasy pytań, które pojawiają się w wywiadach kwestionariuszowych, a mianowicie tzw. pytań draż- liwych. Są to te pytania, których następstwem jest poczucie zakło- potania bądź zagrożenia u respondenta. Artykuł zawiera typologię pytań drażliwych uwzględniającą zróżnicowane niekorzystne odczucia respondenta przez nie wywołane.