

Method and Meaning in Polls and Surveys

by

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To the memory of Solomon Asch, Clifford Geertz, and Samuel Stouffer:

Committed to different methods, all three sought and contributed to a larger meaning.

Preface

During my first year as a graduate student in an interdisciplinary social science program, I wandered into Professor Stouffer's sociology course Opinion and Communication.¹ Ever since, I have been involved in one way or another with polls and surveys, though with continued interest in two other disciplines from within that program, social psychology and anthropology. This book draws on my research and writing between those ancient days and recent months to consider the nature of questions and answers in polls and surveys. In addition, relevant research by others is included in many parts of the book, though without any attempt to cover the survey literature exhaustively. I also indicate missteps I made along the way, together with lessons I hope to have learned from my mistakes. Throughout the book, methodological problems and substantive issues are joined: as the book's title is intended to imply, my goal has always been to connect method and meaning.

There are seven chapters, each with its own focus but also linked to one or more of the other chapters. The Introduction considers how, if at all, "polls" and "surveys" differ. I then explain my use of the terms "method" and "meaning" and give special attention to one method—the survey-based experiment—that plays a significant role throughout the book. A second method, the open-ended "Why" follow-up inquiry, is indicated as equally important.

Chapter 1, Ordinary Questions, Survey Questions, and Policy Questions, discusses the difference between survey questions and the kind of questions we ask in any social interaction, along with problems caused by treating surveys as referenda. In interpreting the question-answer process, we need to reject both "survey fundamentalism," which takes distributions of answers literally, and "survey cynicism," which assumes that

¹ For one perspective on Harvard's Social Relations Department, as well as on Antioch College (mentioned later in this Preface), see the first chapter of Clifford Geertz's book *Available Light* (2000). I was fortunate to have spent time in each setting when it was near its zenith.

investigators can obtain any answer they wish. The nature of bias in surveys is considered also, with a case study involving a serious charge against two noted social scientists, and a strategy is described for building fairness into the construction of questionnaires when controversial issues are investigated. The chapter ends by qualifying my own earlier advice against emphasizing referenda-type response distributions because survey data do help us escape the egocentric assumption that we frequently hold about the views of others. Chapter 1, along with the Introduction, is basic to the rest of the book.

Chapter 2, *The Primordial Distinction between Open and Closed Attitude Questions*, investigates the oldest and most fundamental, yet least tractable and least studied, difference in how survey questions are asked. I show that both types of questioning can and often do constrain answers and thus limit the validity of survey inquiries, but that by putting the two types of questioning together, as often urged but infrequently done, we can construct closed questions that are both manageable and likely to be valid. At the same time, two important case studies are presented that seemed to show defects in questioning—one with open questions, the other with closed questions—but where careful analysis indicates each set of results to be valid, rather than explained by limitations in its method of inquiry. This chapter is probably the most challenging for readers less interested in detailed analysis of survey data.

Chapter 3, *Interpretive Survey Research*, starts from Clifford Geertz's valuable distinction between "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts when working in other cultures and argues that the same difference can apply to using surveys within a single population such as that of the United States. Particularly useful for this purpose are follow-up open probes of answers to closed questions that ask respondents Why they chose a particular response. Yet because polls can seldom afford to ask many Why follow-up questions, the technique of "random probing" is described as well, with illustrations from both Bangladesh and the United States. The chapter also includes an example of linguistic coding that can add further meaning to an analysis of open responses. This is my favorite chapter.

Chapter 4, *Artifacts Are in the Mind of the Beholder*, explores two examples of how the context of a poll or survey can shape answers: one has to do with the order in which questions are asked, and the other with the characteristics of the asker. The first example

has wide substantive meaning because it draws on what seems to be a universal norm of reciprocity within and between societies. The second considers effects created when interviewers are perceived in terms of their race in America and in terms of their political sympathies in Nicaragua. Social change plays an important role in the chapter, as do also connections to other social and biological sciences.

Chapter 5, *The Survey World and Other Worlds*, looks at how the meaning of a primary set of survey results can be enriched by connecting it to other kinds of evidence. First, I consider comparisons of the general population with special populations; second, survey data are compared with data obtained using other, quite different methods; and third, the problematic relation between attitudes measured in surveys and behavior assessed in “real situations” is explored. The chapter ranges widely over different types of research.

Chapter 6, *Hunting a Social Science Snark*, describes a serendipitous discovery that seemed to promise new insight into the nature of the objects of attitudes, the disappointment that occurred during replication, and yet the clues found to understanding of the larger issue. The chapter emphasizes the difficult balance between a search for meaning, which calls for freedom to explore novel hypotheses and interpretations, and the discipline of method, which requires replications of different types to establish confidence in conclusions.

Conclusion: A Brief Look Back at Methods and Meanings, Surveys and Polls, returns once more to consider the key words in the title of the book. In addition, the propositions advanced in previous chapters are characterized as “middle range,” and thus differ from broader frameworks such as “cognitive aspects of survey methodology” and “total survey error.”

I thank Jean Converse for her helpful suggestions on the chapters that follow. She read several of them in their most primitive state and gave me good advice on how (and occasionally whether) to proceed. As the drafts moved toward its present shape, Amy Corning read each chapter more times than she probably cares to remember, caught errors large and small, and made recommendations that improved both content and style. Stanley Presser provided valuable thoughts on two chapters that especially connected with our past collaboration, and Norbert Schwarz gave helpful reactions to a chapter

close to his own research. Karen Blu has been generous in allowing me to quote key passages from a wonderful essay by her husband, Clifford Geertz.

I am grateful to Michael Aronson of Harvard University Press for providing encouragement from an early point and shepherding the book from initial proposal to final form. Most of my research has received support from the National Science Foundation and could not have been carried out in the absence of such grants. At an early point, NSF's Sociology Program appreciated the value of achieving greater understanding of the question-answer process in surveys and polls.

I draw in various places on writing to which a number of former graduate students contributed as co-authors or in other ways. All those individuals have gone on to bigger and better things, but they will find ideas and evidence from early work we did together in some of the pages that follow, with the original articles cited also. The University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research provided a stimulating and supportive setting for much of my research. It also made possible frequent use of the regular Survey of Consumer Attitudes for my survey-based experiments and other explorations, with the further advantage of having the data archived in the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) and available to others. Most of the remaining data I analyze come from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. Use of the Bowdoin College Library and advice by its staff has also been helpful at a number of points.

My earliest analysis of data was carried out by writing on 3 x 5 inch cards a few bits of information obtained from a small set of individuals, then shuffling the cards into piles for counts and the calculation of simple summary statistics. I then graduated to the use of counter-sorters, next to submitting punch cards to mysterious individuals who ran giant computers, and so on to the immensely more powerful and convenient personal computer on which I am writing these chapters—with occasional pauses to switch to programs that enable reanalysis of data to check or pursue a point. Throughout most of that personal evolution—and especially after I moved from Ann Arbor to the Maine coast—my son, Marc, once a three-year-old with whom I put together toy motors and now an electronics engineer and systems programmer, has provided expert solutions for all the ills that computers are heir to—including a few made worse by poor advice from the Help Lines of hardware and software manufacturers. Without Marc's willingness and ability to solve

problems of all kinds, this book might never have seen the light of day nor the dark of night.

My greatest debt is to Jo. Her reading of the final draft of the book has led to many improvements in clarity. But beyond that, she has been important to my life in ways wider and deeper than I could possibly describe. Our relationship goes back to our days as students together at Antioch College, with our future entirely unknown:

I ran with her upon a running path,
Where water squidged beneath the careless grass.
Ahead a confident squirrel sped up a tree—
We stared through leaves to where we could not see....