

Specific survey research features of requests for an answer

Chapter 3 examined the various linguistic structures of requests for answers. In this chapter we will discuss features of requests for an answer that are important with respect to their consequences for survey research. Hence, we will first look at the characteristics of requests that cannot be changed by the researcher because they are connected with the research topic. Then we will discuss some features that the researcher has influence over, such as the choice of the pre-request and the use of batteries of requests for an answer with the same format. So far we have discussed only single requests, but if batteries are used, the form of the requests changes significantly.

Other issues that social scientists are concerned with include whether the request is balanced in the sense that equal attention is given to positive and negative responses in the request and whether absolute or relative judgments are asked, as well as whether a condition should be specified within the request. Finally, the request for an answer can include "opinions of others," or "stimuli to answer," or emphasize that a "personal opinion" is asked. In the following sections these characteristics will be discussed in detail.

4.1 SELECT REQUESTS FROM DATABASES

So far we have suggested the following method to develop a request. First, it is crucial to determine what needs to be studied; for example, "the satisfaction with the work of the present government" or "the amount of hours people work normally." The first concept is a feeling about the government and the second is a factual request about the work. Next typical assertions for these concepts (Chapter 2) need to be specified like the two examples below:

4.1a *I am (very) (dis)satisfied with the work of the present government.*

4.2a *Normally I work x hours.*

The last step is to transform these assertions in requests for an answer (Chapter 3), for example

4.1b *Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the work of the present government?*

This process has little margin for error. The requests measure what was planned to be measured. However, there are other ways of obtaining requests.

For many topics requests already exist in archives such as the one in Cologne (Germany), Essex (United Kingdom), or Ann Arbor (United States) or “question banks” such as the one of CASS in Southampton. Mostly the requests are ordered in some type of classification. However, beware that the classification has to be very detailed in order to find the proper requests. For example, the following classification can be used as a first step:

1. *National politics*
2. *International politics*
3. *Consumption*
4. *Work*
5. *Leisure*
6. *Family*
7. *Personal relations*
8. *Race*
9. *Living conditions*
10. *Background variables*
11. *Health*
12. *Life in general*
13. *Other subjective variables*

This first step in classification is not detailed enough because a large number of requests concerning national politics (the first topic) and concerning work (the fourth topic) exist. Therefore be prepared to invest some time in searching the exact measure of the desired concept. The criterion to evaluate whether a request measures what was intended to be measured is the same as was discussed in the first three chapters. If a concept-by-intuition is studied a direct request is possible, and Chapters 2 and 3 are applicable. If a concept by postulation is being studied, first determine what concepts-by-intuition form the basis for this more abstract concept and then find their direct measures as discussed in the previous two chapters. The most important criterion is, of course, that the possible answers represent assertions that are obvious assertions for the chosen concepts-by-intuition. Chapter 2 provides ample suggestions for this type of check.

4.2 OTHER FEATURES CONNECTED WITH THE RESEARCH GOAL

Directly connected with the research goal and consequently with the choice of concept are some other characteristics of the survey items: the *time reference*, *social desirability*, and *saliency or centrality*. We start with the time reference.

Requests can be asked about the present situation: feelings at the moment or satisfaction with different aspects of life or opinions about policies, norms, or rights. Requests can also be directed to future events or intended behavior. One can ask whether one will buy some goods in the future or will support some

activity or expect changes or events, for instance. Finally, survey items can be directed to the past asking whether one has bought some thing last week or whether one has been to a physician, dentist, and hospital during the last year. It will be clear that the time period mentioned in the request – past, present, or future – is completely determined by the goal of the research, and the designer of the study normally has no possibility to change this time period. Only the requests about the past give a bit more freedom to the researcher. Let us look at this issue a bit more closely.

The time period indicated in requests about the past is called the *reference period*. It will be clear that the longer the reference period is, the more unlikely it is that one can reproduce the requested information from memory. This holds especially for activities that occur very frequently such as, for example, media use. For that reason researchers use as an alternative requests about yesterday. Hence, instead of the request in example 4.3a they ask example 4.3b:

- 4.3a *How much time did you spend watching programs on politics or actuality last week?*
- 4.3b *How much time did you spend watching programs on politics or actuality yesterday?*

But because requests like 4.3b lead to unusual results for at least some people, one also asks the request of example 4.3c:

- 4.3c *How much time did you spend watching programs on politics or actuality on a normal day?*

It is unclear what time period is used in this request. One could say that the respondent is asked for his/her normal behavior at present. Such a shift in time is of course only possible if the research goal allows it.

One more problem should be mentioned concerning requests referring to the past. It is well known from research that people have a tendency to see events as closer to the date of the interview than is true in reality. This phenomenon is called *telescoping* (Schuman and Presser 1981). A typical request that reflects this problem is shown in example 4.4:

- 4.4 *Have you experienced robbery or theft during the last year?*

Respondents are inclined to mention many more cases than should be reported. Scherpenzeel (1995) found that the reported number of cases is twice as high using this request (4.4) than when one asks two requests illustrated by examples 4.5a and 4.5b:

- 4.5a *Have you experienced robbery or theft during the last 5 years?*
- 4.5b *How about the last year?*

It seems that people can better estimate the point in time if first a larger reference period is mentioned (4.5a) than in a one-step procedure like 4.4.

In general the designer of a questionnaire has little flexibility with respect to the specification of the time period mentioned in the requests. Basically he/she has only a choice with respect to the reference period that will be mentioned.

A second characteristic that is directly connected with the choice of the concept is the *social desirability* of some responses. As an example, we can mention that using the direct request about political interest, it is socially desirable for some people to answer that they are interested even if they are not. This happens because the respondents want to make a good impression on the interviewer. This means that differences in responses can be expected between surveys using interviewers and studies that do not use interviewers. So, for sensitive requests differences are expected between personal or telephone interviews and mail surveys and other self-completion procedures. For requests about criminal and sexual behavior, very large social desirability effects have been found in this way (Aquilino 1993, 1994; Turner et al. 1998). This suggests that in a study where social desirability can play an important role, one should consider using a data collection method that reduces the effect of social desirability as much as possible.

The third characteristic that is directly connected with the choice of a concept is the *centrality* or *saliency* of the necessary information to answer the requests. In the past the idea was that people have an opinion about many issues stored in memory that they just had to express in one of the presented response alternatives. Nowadays, researchers have a different view on this process, thanks to the important work of Converse (1964), Zaller (1992), Tourangeau et al. (2000). It is more likely in many situations that people create their answers on the spot when they are asked a request. They will do that on the basis of all kinds of information that they have stored in memory, and it depends on the context of the request, recent events, and their mood which information will be used and therefore what answer will be given. As a consequence, one can expect quite a lot of variation in answers to the same request at different points in time (Converse 1964; Van der Veld and Saris 2003).

However, one should not exaggerate this point of view. There are requests where most people give more or less the same answer all the time, for example, requests about their personal lives, backgrounds, and living conditions. There are also topics about which some people have rather stable opinions and others do not. For example, with respect to political issues, some people who are very interested and follow what is going on have a clear opinion; there are, of course, also people who are not at all interested in politics and are, therefore, more likely to provide different answers if they are forced to answer requests about these issues. This does not mean that this division will always be the same. It may be that the people, who know nothing about politics, know a lot about consumer goods and education where the political interested respondents do not know much about these issues. So the saliency of opinions depends on the topic asked and the interest people have in the specific domain of the survey items (Saris and Sniderman 2004).

4.3 SOME PROBLEMATIC REQUESTS

Besides the problems unavoidably connected with the research topic, there are also problems that can be avoided such as the so called "double-barreled requests" and assertions with more than one component. We will also indicate how to correct them in order to improve the comprehension of the respondents. These complications are also mentioned by Daniel (2000) in his request taxonomy.

4.3.1 Double-barreled requests

In the literature about survey research the problem of requests with several concepts has been extensively discussed (Converse and Presser 1986; Fowler and Maggione 1990; Lessler and Fortsyth 1996; Graesser et al. 2000a,b). An example of such a so called double-barreled request could be

4.6a *How do you evaluate the work of the European Parliament and the Commission?*

The problem with such a request with two object complements in 4.6a (the work of the European Parliament and the Commission) is that two simultaneously opposing opinions are possible: a positive opinion about the Parliament and a negative opinion about the Commission. This leads to confusion about how to answer the request. Linguistically this is a complex sentence built up with the coordinate conjunction "and," and as we stated in Chapter 2, in this case with two different subjects it can become problematic. To avoid this problem, two requests, each containing one of the object complements, is a solution:

4.6b *How do you evaluate the work of the European Parliament?*

4.6c *How do you evaluate the work of the European Commission?*

Another example of two concepts in one request is the following:

4.7a *Do you agree with the statement that the asylum seekers should be allowed into our country, but should adjust themselves to our culture?*

Although such a statement is not unusual in colloquial speech it can create problems for clear answers in surveys. The reason is that the first part of this statement is a right but the second part is a norm. It is again quite possible that a person is opposed to immigration but thinks that immigrants should integrate once they have entered a country. Again, this respondent can be perplexed about what answer to provide to this request. Splitting this statement into two separate requests creates clarity:

4.7b *Do you agree with the statement that asylum seekers should be allowed into our country?*

4.7c *Do you agree with the statement that if asylum seekers come to our country, they have to adjust themselves to our culture?*

The previous examples 4.6a–4.7c showed the problem of double-barreled requests. There are also double-barreled requests that work as intended, as a study for some items of the human value scale of Schwartz (1997) demonstrated. The items are formed by a combination of a value and a norm or a feeling. An example is the following request:

- 4.8 *How much are you like this person?
Looking after the environment is important to him/her. He/she
strongly believes that people should care for nature.*

In this case the importance of a value and a norm are combined in a complex assertion of similarity. This is in principle a typical example of a double-barreled request, but if we ask the two assertions separately with the same prerequisite the correlation between the answers (after correcting for random errors) is so high (.95) that one can assume that these two assertions measure the same (Sarlis and Gallhofer 2004).

The above is an interesting example showing that double-barreled requests do not always have to be problematic. However, one should be aware that they can cause problems and should be used only after a careful study of the consequences. In general such requests can be very confusing for respondents.

4.3.2 Requests with implicit assumptions

There are also requests for answers that assume a first component that is not literally asked but is implicitly true in order to respond to the second component. An example could be

- 4.9a *What is the best book you read last year?*

Here the hidden assumption is that the respondents actually read books. People who do not read books can be unsure about how to answer this request. If the hidden component is made explicit in a separate request, the problem is resolved:

- 4.9b *Did you read books last year?*

If yes:

- 4.9c *What is the best book you read last year?*

Sometimes the previously discussed hidden assumption in the first component, is stated explicitly in the request but the focus for answering is on the second component (Eimans 1990) such as in example 4.10:

- 4.10 *Did you read books last year and what is the best book you read?*

Again, respondents who do not read books will be confused about how to answer the request. Again, the remedy is to split these two requests into two separate requests.

4.4 SOME PREREQUESTS CHANGE THE CONCEPT-BY-INTUITION

Although it is possible to transform assertions in many different ways into requests for answers, it is not always risk-free. In the previous chapter we have discussed prerequisites referring to words such as “saying,” “telling,” “asking,” and “stating,” which were used to indicate a simple transfer of information. They did not refer to specific concepts-by-intuition as described in Chapter 2, which might differ from the concept used in the request for an answer. Hence it can be concluded that using these verbs will not change the concept-by-intuition, as this is shown in four different assertions in direct request format below:

- 4.11a *Has the position of black people changed in the last 30 years?*
4.11b *Was Clinton a good president?*
4.11c *Should women have the right to abortion?*
4.11d *Did you live with your parents when you were 14 years old?*

In sequence these requests represent a judgment (4.11a), an evaluation (4.11b), a right (4.11c) and a behavior (4.11d). If at the beginning of the request “tell me,” “may I ask,” or any other prerequisite is combined with any of the abovementioned neutral verbs the concept measured will not change.

Prerequisites of survey items such as “think,” “believe,” “remember,” “consider,” “find,” “judge,” “agree,” “accept,” “understand,” and “object,” refer to a cognitive judgment. Linguists like Quirk et al. (1985: 1180–1183) independently classified these verbs in a similar way. One would think that using such verbs in the prerequisites would change the concept measured, but it doesn’t always happen, as can be seen in the next three examples.

- 4.12a *Do you think that the position of black people has changed in the last 30 years?*
4.12b *Do you think that Clinton was a good president?*
4.12c *Do you think that women should have the right to abortion?*

There are also verbs which measure feelings such as “like,” and “enjoy.” If such verbs are used in prerequisites in the same way, the concept may change to a feeling about a concept. Examples 4.13a–4.13c illustrate this:

- 4.13a *Do you like that the position of black people has changed in the last 30 years?*
4.13b *Do you like that Clinton was a good president?*
4.13c *Do you like that women should have the right to abortion?*

The structure of the requests is exactly the same, only the meaning of the verb is changed from “think” to “like” (4.12–4.13).

The same effect occurs with adjectives that refer to other concepts like “importance” or “certainty.” In the examples below we see that the concepts asked in the indirect requests are different from the concepts in the direct requests mentioned so far.

4.14a *Is it important for you that the position of black people has changed in the last 30 years?*

4.14b *Is it important for you that Clinton was a good president?*

4.14c *Is it important for you that women should have the right to abortion?*

These examples clearly indicate that one has to be careful with a change from a direct request to an indirect request for substantive reasons. By selecting an indirect request the concept-by-intuition measured in the request, can change in agreement with the concept expressed in the verb or adjective of the prerequisite. That is not the case with the neutral terms that we have used in the previous sections, but this occurs with less neutral terms and not always as we saw in the changed verb examples (4.12a–4.12c) “think,” “believe,” and similar which measure judgments. This is still an area where further research is needed to investigate when the concept measured changes and when it does not.

In Chapter 2 we mentioned that terms added to an assertion can change the concept. Thus, using a prerequisite that is introducing a different concept-by-intuition than the concept connected to the embedded query is referred to as a *complex assertion*. As was stated before, complex concepts seem to confuse people leading to lower reliability of responses (Saris and Gallhofer 2004) and should be avoided if possible.

4.5 BATTERIES OF REQUESTS FOR ANSWERS

In survey research many requests are asked, one after the other in series. If they are in similar form or can be made similar, then the whole process can be simplified by the use of *batteries of requests*. In batteries the entire request and answer categories including the introduction, the request in the broadest sense, and the eventual components after the request such as instructions are mentioned before the first stimulus or statement. Subsequently, one stimulus or statement after the other follows without repeating the request and the answer categories, since it is assumed that the respondent already knows them. Written questionnaires present stimuli and statements often in table format where the stimuli or statements are presented in rows and the answer categories or rating scales, in columns. We will call this kind of structure a “battery of requests for answers.” The difference between stimuli and statements is that statements are complete sentences while stimuli do not consist of complete sentences. They can contain a noun, a combination of nouns, or another part of a sentence or a subordinate clause.

From the above one can conclude that requests for answers with stimuli or statements are quite different from the requests for answers studied in Chapter 3 because they occur in series. The consequences of this approach, which is typical for survey research, will be discussed in later chapters. Here we want to present the structure of batteries and to discuss some of the choices that have to be made to construct batteries. We start with the use of stimuli.

4.5.1 The use of batteries of stimuli

Example 4.15 presents a possible formulation of a battery of stimuli:

4.15 *There are different ways of attempting to bring about improvements or counteract deterioration in society. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?
Please mark either “yes” or “no”.*

	YES 1	NO 2
A. Contacted a politician	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
B. Contacted an association or organization	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C. Contacted a national, regional or local civil servant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
D. Worked in a political party	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
E. Worked in a political action group	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
F. Worked in another organization or association	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
G. Worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
H. Signed a petition	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I. Taken part in a public demonstration	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
J. Taken part in a strike	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
K. Boycotted certain products	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

In this example “any of the following” stands for the so-called stimulus, which could be a single action such as “contacted a politician” or “taken part in a strike.” Such stimuli batteries can also consist of nouns or combinations of nouns. Example 4.16 illustrates this:

4.16 *How satisfied are you with the following aspects of life:*

1. Your income
2. Your house
3. Your social contacts
- ...

Another possibility is that a stimulus consists of a part of a verb phrase such as in example 4.17:

4.17 *Did you do any of the following?*

Shopping

Cleaning

Washing

...

The reader should be aware that stimuli also could occur in all kinds of combinations of requests for answers such as example 4.18 illustrates:

4.18 *Please tell me, whether or not you are satisfied with the following aspects of life:*

One reason to use batteries of stimuli is that the requests and the response categories do not have to be repeated each time. This is very efficient for the questionnaire designer, and the printing of the questionnaires and the interviewer, since they have less to write, print, and read. So far we have not seen any convincing evidence that this approach has a negative effect on the answers of the respondents, although one can expect that they will not answer the requests independently of each other. It is more likely that they make use of their previous answer to judge the next stimulus in case of evaluations on scales. This would lead to correlated errors between the responses; however, Saris and Aalberts (2003) did not find strong evidence for this in their research.

4.5.2 The use of batteries of statements

Very popular in survey research is the indirect request with an interrogative prerequest using the verb “agree” followed by assertions discussed in Chapter 2, often called “statements.” A typical example¹ of such a battery of agree/disagree requests is given below. Example 4.19 is taken from a study of Vetter (1997), but the concept “political efficacy,” which is measured here has already been questioned in a similar way in 1960 in the *American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960):

4.19 *How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements*
(1) disagree very strongly, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor
disagree, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree?

Statements	Possible responses				
	1	2	3	4	5
A. <i>I think I can take an active role in a group that is focused on political issues</i>					
B. <i>I understand and judge important political requests very well</i>					
C. <i>Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on.</i>					

Typical for such a battery of statements are the following characteristics:

1. The request for an answer is formulated only once before the first statement;
2. Also the response categories are mentioned only one time;
3. The formulation of the request for an answer is rather abstract by use of the term “statement” at the place where normally the statement itself follows.

¹ These requests for an answer were originally formulated in German. The authors of this text have translated them into English. These requests are not given as examples of very good requests for this section.

If we abide by the rules we have seen in Chapter 3, the following formulations could also be an alternative:

4.20a *How far do you agree or disagree that you can take an active role in a group that focused on political issues: (1) disagree strongly, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree?*

4.20b *How far do you agree or disagree that you understand and judge important political requests very well: (1) disagree strongly, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree?*

4.20c *How far do you agree or disagree that sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like you cannot really understand what is going on: (1) disagree strongly, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree?*

This transformation to a standard indirect request with an interrogative agree/disagree prerequest and a different embedded declarative assertion of each request makes it clear that the battery form is far more efficient.

Krosnick and Fabrigar (forthcoming) make a comparison with direct requests for an answer. They suggest that the popularity of the use of agree/disagree batteries lies in the fact that it reduces the amount of work as we have mentioned above and maybe even more importantly, this approach can be applied to nearly all possible assertions in the same way.

If direct requests for an answer are more desirable a different form for each assertion is needed, as is illustrated for the same assertions in examples 4.21a–4.21c. The transformation of the battery mentioned above to three direct requests leads to the following result:

4.21a *Could you take a very active, quite active, limited role or no role at all in a group that is focused on political action?*

4.21b *Can you understand and judge important political issues very well, well, neither good nor bad, bad, very bad?*

4.21c *How often does it seem to you that politics and government are so complicated that a person like you cannot really understand what is going on: very often, quite often, sometimes, seldom, or never?*

This transformation again indicates the efficiency of the battery format for the researcher and the interviewers. They do not have to specify and read a different response scale for each separate assertion. Whether the efficiency for the researcher and the interviewer goes together with efficiency for the respondent and with better data is another matter. Saris and Krosnick (forthcoming) have the following opinion on the matter:

