CHAPTER 4

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 prerequest 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:

4.3.c *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 prerequest 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 (Saris 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 (Emans 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 prerequests 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 prerequest is combined with any of the abovementioned neutral verbs the concept measured will not change.

Prerequests 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 prerequests 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 prerequests 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 prerequest. 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 prerequest 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	☐	☐
B. Contacted an association or organization	☐	☐
C. Contacted a national, regional or local civil servant	☐	☐
D. Worked in a political party	☐	☐
E. Worked in a political action group	☐	☐
F. Worked in another organization or association	☐	☐
G. Worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker	☐	☐
H. Signed a petition	☐	☐
I. Taken part in a public demonstration	☐	☐
J. Taken part in a strike	☐	☐
K. Boycotted certain products	☐	☐

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 example[1] 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 think I can take an active role in a group that is focused on political issues					
B. I understand and judge important political requests very well					
C Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on.					

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:

The goal of agree/disagree requests is usually to place respondents on a continuum. For example, an assertion saying "I am usually happy" is intended to gauge how happy the respondent usually is, on a dimension from "never" to "always." An assertion saying "I like hot dogs a lot" is intended to gauge how much the respondent likes hot dogs, on a dimension from "dislike a lot" to "like a lot." And a statement saying "Ronald Reagan was a superb President" is intended to gauge respondents' evaluations of Reagan's performance, on a dimension ranging from "superb" to "awful."

To answer requests with such statements requires four cognitive steps of respondents (Carpenter and Just 1975; Clark and Clark 1977; Trabasso et al. 1971). First, they must read the statement and understand its literal meaning. Then, they must look deeper into the statement to discern the underlying dimension of interest to the researcher. This is presumably done by identifying the variable quantity in the statement. In the first example above, the variable is identified by the word "usually" it is frequency of happiness. In the second example above, the variable is quantity, identified by the phrase "a lot." And in the third example, the variable is quality, identified by the word "superb." Having identified their dimension, respondents must then place themselves on the dimension of interest. For example, the statement, "I am usually happy," asks respondents first to decide how happy a person they are. Then, they must translate this judgment into the agree/disagree response options appropriately, depending upon the valence of the stem. Obviously, it would be simpler to skip this latter step altogether and simply ask respondents directly for their judgments of how happy they are.

It is self-evident here that answering batteries of statements is not a simple task for the respondent. Moreover, hundreds of papers have been written about the issue that respondents may have a tendency to simplify their task and to answer all requests in a battery in a same way. This phenomenon is called *response set* or *acquiescence*. The response set will increase the correlation between the answers in the batteries but this extra correlation is a method effect and has nothing to do with the substance of the requests. Krosnick and Fabrigar (forthcoming) and Billiet and McClendon (2000) have discussed this problem extensively. It is also one of the possible reasons why method effects are found in multitrait-multimethod studies (Andrews 1984; Költringer 1995; Scherpenzeel and Saris 1997; Saris and Aalberts 2003).

Finally, Krosnick and Fabrigar (forthcoming) have made the argument, mentioned in Chapter 2, that the requests asking "How far do you agree " does not estimate the extremity of an opinion but the intensity, which is a different aspect of measurement. The latter aims at the strength of the agreement with the statement and this is not the same as the extremity of an opinion in the

former. If one says "I like ice cream very much," that is not the same as "I very strongly agree with the statement: I like ice cream."

We would like to mention one more complication for this method. As was mentioned above the respondents have to place themselves in the dimension of interest. After careful examination of statement 4.19c, it was suggested that the purpose of the item was to evaluate how often people had the impression that politics and government were too complicated. This was formulated in example 4.21c which is repeated here in example 4.22.

4.22 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?

It is very clear what a choice of one of the answer categories means; however, this does not mean that no errors will be made (Hippler and Schwarz 1987) or that people have a clear opinion in their mind of what they should say (Tourangeau et. al. 2000).

However, several alternatives for this request are available if an agree/disagree format is used, as we show in questions 4.22a–4.22e:

*4.22a How far do you agree or disagree that politics and government **very often** seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on: (1) disagree very strongly, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree,(5)strongly agree*

*4.22b How far do you agree or disagree that politics and government **quite often** seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on: (1) disagree very strongly, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, (5)strongly agree?*

*4.22c How far do you agree or disagree that politics and government **sometimes** seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on: (1) disagree very strongly, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, (5)strongly agree?*

*4.22d How far do you agree or disagree that politics and government **seldom** seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on: (1) disagree very strongly, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree?*

*4.22e How far do you agree or disagree that politics and government **never seem** so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on: (1) disagree very strongly, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree?*

These statements differ only by the word indicating the frequency of the occurrence of the event of interest. Logically all these possibilities (and many others) can be employed, and there is seemingly no reason to prefer one over another. But are there practical reasons to prefer one request above the other? In order to check this, let us perform a small thought experiment.

Imagine that you have the idea *very often* that politics is too complicated for you. Now an interviewer comes with the request 4.22a and if you have the idea *very often*, then your answer is simple: strongly agree. Imagine now that you have the idea *often* and you are confronted with the same request 4.22a: both agree and disagree could be chosen. Formally disagree is better but with a bit of flexibility you could as a respondent also say agree. Suppose now that you have the idea *sometimes* and you are confronted with the same request: most likely you would choose disagree.

Now, imagine again that you have the idea *very often* but the request is asked if you have this idea sometimes as in 4.22c. You may be confused as to what to answer because you can say disagree since you have these ideas often but you can also agree as you have them more than sometimes. Suppose now that you *never* have these ideas and the interviewer uses request 4.22c with the term sometimes. You could say "disagree" since you never have these ideas or you can agree depending on your perception of whether "sometimes" is rather close to never.

Our thought experiment shows that the statements in the middle of the scale encounter the problem that people at both sides of the spectrum can give the same answer, which makes further analysis rather problematic. Extreme statements have a lesser issue with this particular problem, but these statements have the problem that people with a different opinion than stated in the request can all choose the same response of disagree. This effect will be even stronger when the extreme statement is very extreme.

The conclusion on the basis of our practical analysis is that, if one really wants to use statements, one should choose a statement that represents an extreme position but that is not too far from the opinions of the people; otherwise no variation will be obtained. This analysis also shows that the choice of the formulation of item 3 in the political efficacy request is definitely incorrect.

Given all the complications of batteries with statements it is very questionable why this type of formulation is so popular. Further research is required, but we recommend avoiding this approach and using direct requests. It is more work for the researcher and the interviewer but it simplifies the task of the respondents and probably increases the quality of the answers.

4.6 OTHER FEATURES OF SURVEY REQUESTS

The possible consequences of other features of requests are discussed in the next sections.

4.6.1 The formulation of comparative or absolute requests for answers

We move now to a quite different aspect of the formulation of requests for an answer, namely, the use of comparative or absolute judgments. Comparative requests for answers ask about the similarity or dissimilarity of two objects, and they also ask for degrees of similarity. Examples of this type include

4.23a Are you more satisfied with your new job than with the old one?
4.23b Do you earn less money in your new job?
4.23c How much better is your daughter in languages than your son?
4.23d How much do you prefer languages above science?
4.23e Which political party do you prefer?

As the first two examples 4.23a and 4.23b illustrate, the inequality can be expressed by "more...than" or "less...than" where the comparison "than" can be implicit as in the second example. But it also can be expressed by comparative adjectives or adverbs such as "much better than" (4.23c) or by words that indicate a preference as shown in the last two examples.

Requests for an answer that ask for an absolute judgment, in contrast, do not express a comparison in terms of more or less than from a reference object. Absolute judgments are very frequently used in survey research. Examples are as follows:

4.24a Are you satisfied with your job?
4.24b How satisfied are you with your job?
4.24c How good are you at mathematics?

Although absolute judgments are very popular in survey research, it is questionable whether people are very good in making such judgments. In psychophysics this phenomenon has also been observed by Poulton (1968). Similar results have been found by Saris (1988) in survey research. A famous experiment by Schwarz and Hippler (1987) showed the same results. They asked for the amount of time people spent watching TV and showed that even in such cases many people gave relative judgments, relative to watching patterns of other people, suggested by the specified response categories, and not absolute judgments. We will come back to this example in the next chapter.

4.6.2 Conditional clauses specified in requests for answers

Sometimes in requests for answers clauses are included that refer to something that must happen first so that something else can happen. This is called a "condition" in the narrowest sense, or an event is mentioned that is qualified as uncertain. Such clauses are called *conditional* (Swan 1995: 245,252), and they restrict the content of the request to this specific condition or event. The following examples can illustrate conditional clauses:

4.25a Do you think it is acceptable that a woman has an abortion if she has been violated?
4.25b If the present government is reelected, do you believe that they will realize what they had promised before the elections?

4.25c Should refugees be allowed to work in our country, provided they take simple jobs?

4.25d Should Muslims be allowed to build mosques in our country as long as they are not subsidized by the government?

4.25e If you finish your studies in some years, are you planning to work in the field of study?

4.25f Suppose that the government increases the income tax next year; would you have to change your lifestyle?

4.25g Imagining, you were the president, which of the following measures for our country would you take first?

Examples 4.25a–4.25d illustrate conditions in the narrowest sense. The first two are specified by an "if" clause, while the third and the fourth use the expressions "provided, and "as long as," which means that the event mentioned in this clause should occur first before the main clause can be appraised. Examples 4.25e–4.25g refer to uncertain or hypothetical events. Request 4.25e is again formulated with the word "if" and expresses just an uncertain event in the future. Often reality is too complex to be asked without condition, like requests about abortion.

Request 4.25f uses the word "suppose" and indicates in this example again an uncertain event in the future, while the last example expressed by "imagine" refers – because of the use of the past tense – to a very unlikely event in the future. Respondents may have never thought about these specific hypothetical situations. In that case they have not premeditated their answer, and it is questionable if these responses have any stability (Tourangeau et al. 2000).

4.6.3 Balanced or unbalanced requests for answers

A *balanced request* for an answer means that it is made formally explicit that both negative and affirmative answers are possible (Schuman and Presser 1981:180, Billiet et al.1986: 129). If only one answer direction is provided the request for an answer is called *unbalanced*. An example of a balanced request could be:

4.26 To which extend do you favor or oppose euthanasia?

This request is balanced as it explicitly specifies both answer directions: in favor of and in opposition to. Sometimes this seems to be a bit exaggerated. For example one could also have asked:

4.27 Do you strongly favor, favor, neither favor nor oppose, oppose, or strongly oppose euthanasia?

Such requests are formulated because the researcher tries to prevent more attention being given to one side of the scale than to the other. In general it is supposed that a bias in the response will occur in the answer direction that is indicated in the request even though there is no research evidence supporting

this assumption. The reason that no errors have been found may be that people are very much familiar with one-sided formulations and are very well able to fill in the missing alternatives themselves (Gallhofer and Saris 1995).

The following example is balanced although the request indicates none of the answer directions:

4.28 What do you think about euthanasia?

A request that does not specify the different sides is also considered as balanced in our research, although this is a rather arbitrary decision. Examples of unbalanced requests for an answer could be:

4.29a To what extent do you favor euthanasia?

4.29b To what extent do you oppose euthanasia?

4.29c Some people think that euthanasia should be legalized. In principle, what is your opinion about euthanasia?

Example 4.29a only mentions the positive answer direction, while the negative one should be guessed by the respondent. In example 4.29b only the negative direction is indicated and in example 4.29c only a favorable opinion is mentioned in the survey item.

In the case where the response possibilities go from zero to positive or from zero to negative (unipolar scales, Chapter 5), the notion of balance is not applicable because there exists only one direction. An example might illustrate this:

4.30 How often do you go to church?

Here "often" is mentioned in the request, but the request is nevertheless unbiased because this is a unipolar request, as there is only one side. The following request for an answer, however, is more complicated:

4.31 To what extent do you favor euthanasia?

This question is unbalanced because only one side of the scale is indicated. However, the unbalanced question can be unbiased if it is posed only to respondents in favor of euthanasia. Otherwise this request is a "leading" request and that is an extreme form of bias.

4.7 SPECIAL COMPONENTS WITHIN THE REQUEST

Sometimes other components, not necessarily belonging to the request for an answer are placed in the request. We shall discuss two different components: remarks to stimulate the respondent to answer and remarks that emphasize that the subjective opinion of the respondents are requested and not a general statement. We start with the remarks that are intended to stimulate the response.

4.7.1 Requests for answers with stimulation for an answer

A special stimulation to elicit an answer from the respondent can be included in the requests for answers. They can be in either imperative or interrogative prerequests with all kinds of gradation of politeness as already mentioned in Chapter 3 in connection with procedures to formulate requests for answers. Some examples of a stimulation to answer within requests for answers could be

4.32a Tell me, are you going to vote?
4.32b Would you be so kind as to tell us what you did before studying at the university?
4.32c Could you tell us who is the president of the EU?

Sometimes a stimulation for an answer also occurs in other parts of survey items such as introductions or motivations of the researchers, which are discussed in Chapter 6.

The presence or absence of a stimulation to answer requires attention because their presence might make a difference in the readiness of the respondent to comply. If a stimulation is formulated very politely, it might be that the respondent is more inclined to answer, even if this person has no specific opinion and might just give a random opinion because of the extra encouragement to give an answer.

4.7.2 Emphasizing the subjective opinion of the respondent

Like stimulation for an answer, a stimulus for the respondent to give his/her own opinion can occur within requests and encourage the subjects to give an opinion even if he/she hardly thought about the issue. However, this procedure has an effect and will be studied later. Some examples of stimulation of respondent opinion might be:

4.33a According to you, what is the most important issue in this election?
4.33b In your opinion who is responsible for the economic recession in our country?
4.33c What do you believe/think is the main reason for the economic recession?
4.33d We would like to know whether you personally think that the death penalty should be implemented.

The first two examples relate to specific direct requests where the expressions "according to you" or "in your opinion" stress that a personal appraisal is desired. In the third example the interrogative clause "do you think" emphasizes the subjective opinion and in the fourth example the clause "whether you personally think..." functions in a similar way. Emphasis on the subjective opinion also can occur in other parts of the survey item such as in the introduction (see Chapter 6).

Summary

In this chapter several decisions in developing a request for an answer are discussed again, but now from the perspective of a survey researcher. The choice of the research topic brings with it some unavoidable consequences. For example, given the research goal, the decision of whether the requests are directed to the past, present, or future is predetermined. The research goal also determines the social desirability of the possible response alternatives and the salience of the topic. However, the format of the question can be chosen while doublebarreled requests, requests with an implicit assumption, and prerequests that change the concept can be easily avoided.

In this chapter we suggest why the use of batteries is so popular in survey research. The reason is mainly the efficiency of the formulation because of the request and the answer categories have to be mentioned only once. To our knowledge batteries with stimuli do not create problems, but batteries with statements have been criticized heavily by different authors. One reason is the possibility of response set or acquiescence that can generate correlations that are due to the method (use of a battery) and have no substantive meaning. Another problem is that the choice of the statements is rather arbitrary, but the choice will certainly have an effect on the response distributions and most likely also on the correlations with other variables.

Furthermore, several characteristics of requests for an answer have been discussed which may play a role in the quality of an item. First, the choice between absolute and comparative judgments has been discussed, followed with considerations for the choice between balanced and unbalanced requests. Whether we can say that one characteristic is indeed better than another requires further research. But as far as we know, the balancing of the requests by survey researchers does not seem to be based on empirical evidence while at the same time balancing the requests makes the formulations much more complex.

Finally, it was mentioned that sometimes researchers include in the texts requests to stimulate respondents to give answers or to give their own opinions. These choices also require further research to determine whether adding them to texts has a positive effect on the results.

Exercises

1. Look at the following request for an answer:
   Do you have the feeling that homosexuals should have the same rights with respect to marriage and raising children?
   a. What do you think that the researcher wants to measure?
   b. What went wrong in the formulation of this question?
2. Formulate a battery for human values using the following value stimuli: honesty, love, safety, and power.
3. Formulate a battery for human values using the same values mentioned in exercise 1, but this time make a statement for each of these values.

4. Several alternative statements can be formulated; indicate how these different statements can be created for the value "honesty."
5. Which of the statements you created in exercise 3 is the best?
6. How would a human value request be formulated for the value "honesty" using direct requests?
7. Is it possible to formulate this request in an absolute and in a comparative way?
8. Is your request balanced? If so, when could it be considered unbalanced? If not, how could it be balanced?
9. Can you also add texts to the last statement to stimulate a response and to emphasize that a personal opinion is asked?
10. With respect to your own questionnaire, discuss whether you have made the best choices while considering the abovementioned options? If so, why?