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2019 Workshop: Interviewers and Their Effects
from a Total Survey Error Perspective

Sociology, Department of

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The Cannell Legacy

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Peter Miller and Nancy Mathiowetz

The Cannell Legacy

Charles F. Cannell (Charlie)

- Clinical Psychologist
- Director of Columbus, Ohio Counseling Service
- Field Director, Department of Program Surveys, WW II
- Field Director, Survey Research Center, Michigan
- Director, Program in Interview Methodology, SRC

The Legacy: An Integrated Collection of Survey Measurement Tools

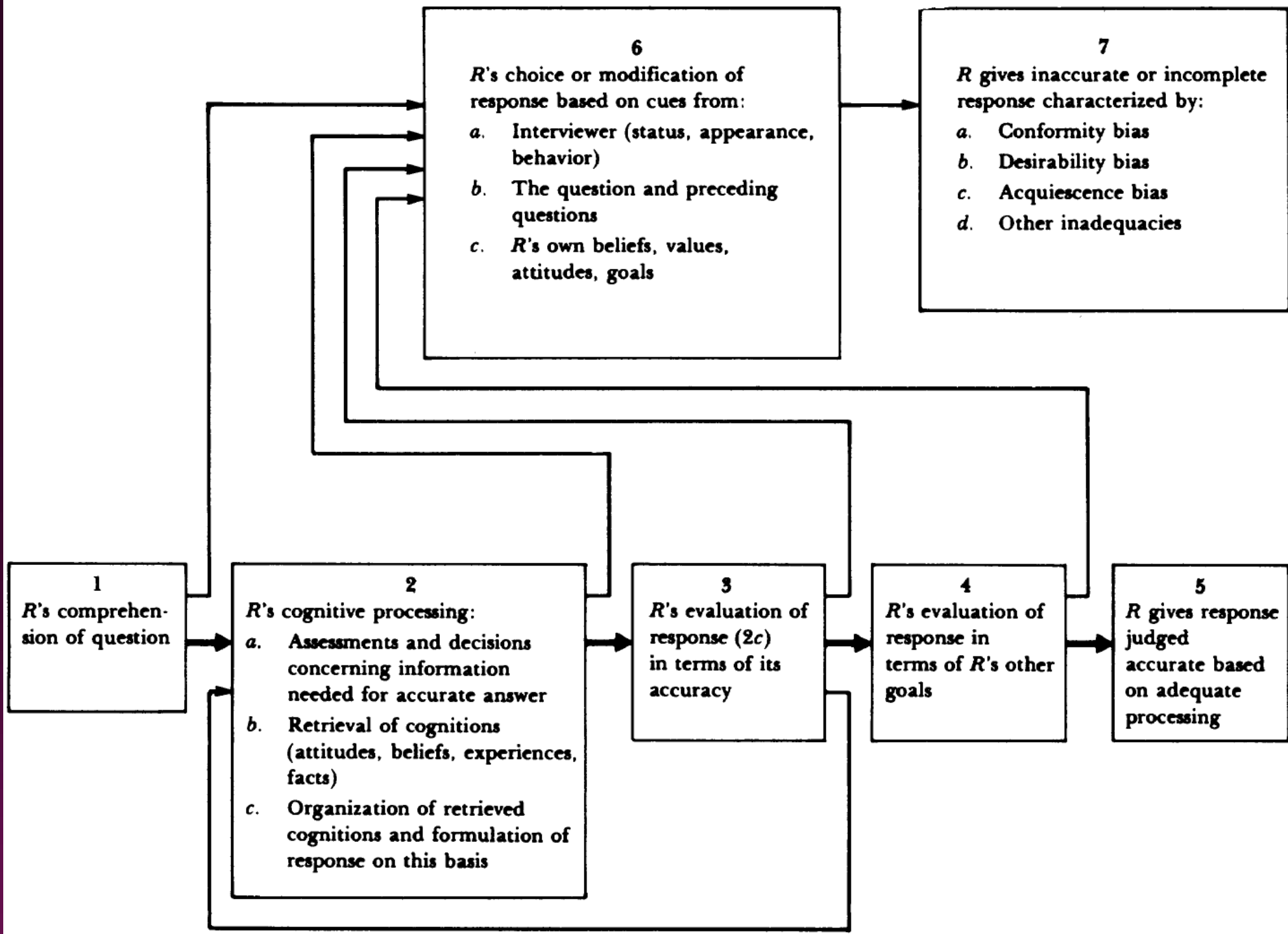
- Empirical documentation of response error
- Model of the response process
- Theory of the interview
- Set of complementary interviewing techniques
- Interview Observation

Documenting response error

- Collaboration with the U.S. Public Health Service in early 1960s
- Record check studies of doctor visit and hospitalization reporting
- Show relationships between elapsed time, salience, social desirability and under-reporting of health events
- Findings converge with allied projects sponsored by USPHS
- Findings parallel those of similar projects in other fields

Model of the response process

- Heuristic diagram showing steps in response process
- Progenitor of other conceptualizations
- Shows ways in which respondent can produce accurate or inaccurate responses
- The 'inaccurate' path foreshadows 'satisficing'



Theory of the interview

- How do I stay on the straight path to an accurate response?
- Questions need to be designed for ready comprehension
- Interviewers need to communicate questions accurately
- Other communication in the interview needs to be aimed at increasing accurate reporting
- Apart from administering questions, interviewing involves giving help to respondents on how to answer them
- What does the question require? How should I go about answering? How hard should I work? How do I know if I accomplished the task?

Taming interview meta-communication

- Any communication other than question-asking needs to be scripted in service of accurate reporting
- Commitment – this is your promise to approach the interview with care and diligence
- Instructions – this is how you approach the interview tasks, in general and with respect to particular questions
- Feedback – this is how you know if you followed the instructions
- Respondents more likely to stay on path to accurate response if interviewers give tips on how to do so.

Interview observation

- Views about communication in the interview were shaped by research on interview interaction
- First focus on interviewer evaluation
 - Detailed examination of behavior of both the interviewer and respondent
 - Control interviewer behavior that does not promote response accuracy
- Later, a question evaluation tool
 - Look at initial question asking and adequacy of response
 - “Inadequate” answers signal problems with the question
 - Uses: pretesting, diagnosis of data quality issues

Research on technique effects

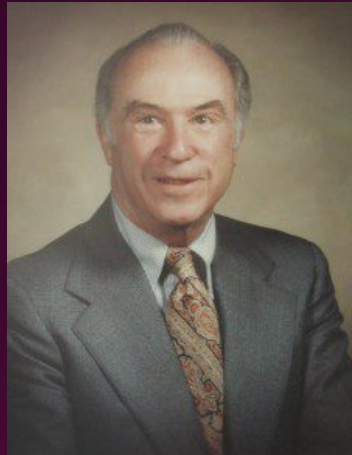
- A variety of studies – small, homogeneous samples and large national samples, surveys focused on different topics
- Instructions, feedback and commitment have shown promise in reducing response error
- Response error often operationalized as under-reporting, but studies have also shown reduced over-reporting of socially desirable behavior and more reporting of undesirable behavior and attitudes
- Could be useful in promoting measurement reliability as well as reducing bias

Looking forward

- More research inspired by the Cannell perspective is needed
- Research may document effectiveness of the approach in new contexts or specify conditions in which they are more or less successful
- The approach is perhaps more relevant in era when survey participation is under threat
- The approach may work as well or better in surveys employing newer technologies as it has in traditional surveys

Charles Cannell Fund in Survey Methodology:

Application Deadline March 29, 2019



- Develop social psychological theories
- Test hypotheses and techniques derived from these theories
- Develop techniques for measuring and improving the interaction between the respondent and the interviewer

- Dissertation research
- Small experimental studies
- Graduate students, early career researchers, or visiting scholars

More information is available at:

<https://isr.umich.edu/fellowships-awards/charles-cannell-fund-in-survey-methodology/>