

# To Lead or Not to Lead – That Is the Question - Social Science Space

*Business & Management INK*

4–5 minutes

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*Today we take a look at the value of understanding how questions can unwittingly lead and bias responses inspired by the article [“Enhancing reflexivity about the influence of leading questions in interviews”](#) published in the Methodology Corner of the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science. In the article, authors, [Heather Cairns-Lee](#), adjunct professor of leadership at IMD business school in Lausanne and visiting research fellow at the University of Surrey; [James Lawley](#), partner at The Developing Company, London; and [Paul Tosey](#), honorary visiting fellow at Surrey Business School at the University of Surrey, share why interviewers need to pay attention to how their questions may unwittingly lead and the influence that this can have on the authorship of data. The authors combined their academic interest in interviewing with practical experience as facilitators, teachers and researchers of ‘Clean Language,’ a method of asking questions with minimal assumptions, developed by David Grove ([Grove and Panzer 1989](#)).*





(Photo: [@Christina @ wocintechchat.com/Unsplash](https://www.unsplash.com/photo/Christina))

We were motivated to develop this article about the potential for the phrasing of interview questions to lead and unduly influence the interviewee's responses because our phenomenological research aims to understand people's subjective experience and their inner worlds of mental models and metaphors. Despite the ubiquity of interviews across different epistemological approaches for gathering data and the centrality of questions to all interviewing genres, little guidance exists about how to 'avoid leading questions'. Instead, the issue is typically treated as self-evident and assumed to be confined to novice researchers. We believe this under-acknowledges the prevalence of *unintended* leading questions. This is important because it has implications for knowledge claims made by researchers, particularly in research that aims to elicit interviewees' subjective experience.

Our curiosity about how to decipher leading from non-leading questions resulted in a typology of how interview questions can lead in three ways; through introduced content, presupposition and evaluation. These are evident in the phrasing of questions. The typology can be used by researchers to sensitize them to the possible effect of their questions introducing content, subtle presuppositions and evaluation as they establish interview protocols. However, we contend that the intention to ask non-leading questions is not sufficient as unintentional leading is likely to occur during the interview in the spontaneous generation of responses and questions.



Heather Cairns-Lee, left, James Lawley and Paul Tosey

To address this issue, we provide researchers with a method – the ‘cleanness rating’ – to review and assess the degree of potential influence of their interview questions. The rating, derived from the principles of Clean Language Interviewing ([Tosey, Lawley and Meese 2014](#)), clarifies the researcher’s role in the production of interview data, supporting them to become more reflexive.

Furthermore, the method contributes to methodological transparency and quality in qualitative research.

We believe the research is innovative because it moves beyond the typical advice to avoid leading questions and makes clear how questions can lead in interviews. We contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the issue with examples that illustrate how even well-intentioned questions from experienced interviewers can have the potential to inadvertently influence interviews responses. The cleanness rating provides a method to enhance researcher reflexivity serving an educational function and drawing attention to interviewers’ role in the generation of data. Our hope is that our article will impact the field by increasing interviewers’ awareness of and ability to manage the potential of interview questions to lead and influence data, and to improving interviewing practice and quality.