

Eliciting Interview Data Cleanly Through Minimising Leading Questions

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The purpose of this chapter is to enable interviewers to understand how they can elicit interviewee-generated data that are not ‘muddied’ by the researcher. The chapter has three main components. First, we discuss the authorship of data and illustrate how questions may unwittingly affect this authorship. Second, we outline the problem with ‘leading’ questions and introduce three features of leading questions that are relevant to researchers from different research epistemologies. Third, we introduce the ‘cleanness rating’, which is a way to categorize how questions are used in an interview according to the extent to which they are leading or ‘clean’. We conclude with the difference this can make for researchers, including enhancing the capacity for interviewers to reflect on their practice and making their role of in the generation of interview data more transparent.

The authorship of data in interviewing

Certain interviewing genres aim to elicit authentic data that are faithful to the interviewee’s experience. For example, phenomenological research that aims to explore the subjective experience and meaning of a person’s lifeworld (Vermersch, 2009) as highlighted in chapter 1, and other applications exemplified in Part II of this book. In order for this to happen, it is important to minimise the introduction of an interviewer’s assumptions in questions. To establish ‘authorship’ we mean showing that data originated with the interviewee and not from the intervention of the interviewer. This has clear implications for attention to the way that interviews are framed through interviewer interventions and questions.

The issue of authorship of data is important because interviewer prompts and questions inevitably create structures and categories for the interviewee that influence attention even inadvertently (Potter & Hepburn, 2012). Consequently, Vermesch (2009) suggests asking ‘content empty’ questions that leave the participant free to answer from their own frame of reference. However, as we show below, the introduction of interviewer content is not the only way authorship can be compromised. Clean language interviewing (CLI) is one approach that enables researchers to elicit rich personal accounts at the same time as bracketing their own assumptions (known as *epoché* in phenomenology) through the use of ‘clean’ questions and exquisite attention to the participant’s subjective experience (Tosey et al., 2014).

The ability to evidence the authorship of data enhances confirmability, which shows how “findings and conclusions can be verified as reflective of and grounded in the participant’s perceptions.” (Jensen, 2008 p. 112). Confirmability entails clearly re-presenting research participants’ perspectives by making the authorship of data transparent, which enhances the authenticity of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This can be achieved by making transparent the questions and responses in interviews and examining whether the data originated from the interviewee or from the form of the interviewer’s question. Wherever it is the researcher’s intention to produce faithful accounts of an interviewee’s lifeworld, confidence in the authorship and authenticity are relevant.

The problem of leading questions

It is widely recognized that leading questions can influence interviewees' responses in ways that may be detrimental to the authenticity of data (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2020). But what is it that makes a question leading? The qualitative research literature appears to regard leading questions as a single category (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018) that is obvious, easy to avoid and confined to novice or unskilled interviewers (Patton, 2015). This results in guidance that is confined to exhortations to 'avoid leading questions'. However, we suggest that there are several forms of leading; that it is neither common sense nor straightforward to avoid leading questions because they are more subtle and more prevalent in interviews than usually believed; and that they often occur unwittingly.

Asking questions is ubiquitous, yet limited attention outside of the criminal justice system has been paid to the ways in which they can lead or to the extent that answers depend upon the formulation of questions. Indeed designing clear and insightful questions is more difficult than many researchers realize (Q. Qu & Dumay, 2011). However, attention to the way questions are formulated is vital because even a slight rewording can make a difference, as illustrated by Loftus and Palmer (1974) and discussed in chapter 3. Whilst the interviewer's language does not determine the interviewee's response it is highly likely to influence it, especially as interviewers "innocuously" generate support for their views "already held *a priori*" (Rapley & Antaki, 1998 p. 605). Furthermore, although "all answers depend on the way a question is formulated" (Mishler, 2009 p.2), respondents typically do not notice the suggestibility of a question or the effect that specific words may have on them (Hubbard, 1950).

All this increases the likelihood that the interviewee will answer within the frame set by the question and thus from the constructs of the interviewer. All questions 'set a frame' and interviewers manage the interview process by directing attention through their framing of questions. However, it is important to distinguish between restrictive frames and those that leave the interviewee room to answer from their own worldview. How interviewers ask questions is intensified by the relative authority of the interviewer, who defines the topic, asks the majority of questions and decides what constitutes relevant and sufficient responses (Wang, 2006). This underscores the benefit of interviewers considering their own interventions "with as much attention as what the interviewee says" (Tinggaard, 2007 p. 172) in order to foster confidence in the authorship of data and subsequent findings.

Many textbooks advocate using 'open' questions in interviews, assuming they are innocuous and offer broad scope for response. However, open questions can be leading when they presume information and closed questions do not necessarily lead. For example, the clean language question, 'is there anything else about that?' is a closed question that invites a yes or no response with the purpose of checking whether there the interviewee would like to elaborate further. If so, they have scope to do so. Moving beyond injunctions to avoid leading questions by asking open questions, we highlight three specific ways that questions can be leading.

Three ways in which questions lead

We conducted an extensive review of the qualitative research literature to understand how questions lead, however, despite the plethora of books about interviewing, we found little that went beyond the general advice to avoid leading questions. Drawing on interview transcripts to which we had access and reviewing theories of presupposition (Beaver & Geurts, 2014), metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and interviewee's bias' such as the acquiescence effect (Podsakoff et al., 2003) we have derived a typology of three ways in which questions lead (Cairns-Lee et al., 2021).

These three features of leading questions – *introduced content*, *presuppositions* and *evaluation* – are highlighted in Table 1 along with illustrative examples. The consequence of all types of leading is that it becomes harder to differentiate between data which represent the *interviewee's* constructs authentically, and data which represent the *researcher's* view. This is important for research quality because it lowers confidence in confirmability and the authenticity of participants' constructs and life-worlds, and claims based on these findings.

The most obvious way in which interviewers lead is when they introduce their own categories, schemas and assumptions in to their questions. This leading feature is discernable by words that originate from the interviewer rather than the interviewee. The introduction of interviewer metaphors is especially important for two reasons. First, people are generally only aware of the metaphorical nature of language when it is overtly metaphorical. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are far more common than realized and the majority of metaphors are probably used without either party's awareness. Secondly, all metaphors come with entailments, unstated but necessary or inevitable features or consequences, that can be presupposed as inherent to the metaphor (see chapter 3 for further elaboration of metaphor).

Presuppositions are often a subtle feature of leading questions because presupposed ideas are implicit in the words or sentence construction. Presupposition refers to knowledge that is assumed or taken for granted and may therefore pass unnoticed or unquestioned by the interviewee. Yet in order for the interviewee to make sense of a question they have to “accommodate the presupposition, (initially at least)” (Cairns-Lee et al., 2021). Whilst the role of presupposition in questions and answers has received attention in other disciplines, it has received limited attention in qualitative research. This is surprising since presuppositions influence the whole research process, including how concepts are defined, the framing of research questions, and the selection of methods for data collection and analysis (Hatch & Yanow, 2008).

We identify two types of presupposition that are pertinent to leading questions. A structural presupposition concerns the way the question is phrased that assumes that something exists that has not previously been stated by the interviewee. For example the question ‘what did you do then?’ presupposes that the interviewee did in fact do something. Compare this to the clean language question 'And then what happened?' which only presupposes *something* happened.

The second type of presupposition is one of logic that presupposes that there is a relationship between two or more things that may not have been articulated by the interviewee. A common example is when interviewers ask ‘how did that make you feel?’ which strongly suggests that an event caused a feeling.

The third feature of leading questions is evaluative comments by the interviewer. These can be stated in words or in tone and can serve to undermine the interviewee’s confidence in their own experience. An example comes from a well-known qualitative research book (Marshall & Rossman, 2015 p. 149):

Interviewer: How many students do you have?
DC: About 100.
Interviewer: 100! Are you able to have a relationship with so many?
DC: I feel I’m an advocate for students. I do whatever needs to be done to get them through this

Here the interviewer seems to be taken by surprise and DC may interpret the follow up question as challenging DC’s ability to have a relationship with that number of students, perhaps presupposing that DC should have a relationship with all their students.

All three features of leading are often invisible to interviewers and interviewees yet they can affect how questions are received. Each feature can narrow the possibility for interviewees to respond from their own perspective and the effects of leading questions are compounded if they involve more than one feature.

**Table 2.1 Leading features of interview questions with examples
(adapted from Cairns-Lee, Lawley and Tosey, 2021)**

Leading Feature	Description	Potential Effect on Authorship	Examples
Introduced Content	Interviewer uses terms not previously used by the interviewee.	Interviewee adopts interviewer's terms.	Underlined words have not be used by the interviewee: Were you <u>frightened</u> , or <u>anxious</u> ? So, your <u>outlook is different</u> ? Has it been a <u>positive experience</u> ?
Presupposition	Can take two forms: a) the <i>structure or syntax</i> of the question presupposes a situation that the interviewee has not previously stated exists; b) the question presupposes a <i>logical relationship</i> between two or more items not specified by the interviewee (often a cause-effect relationship is assumed).	Unless the interviewer's presupposition is rejected, the interviewee may adopt the assumption of the presupposed situation or relationship.	(a) Underlined words imply the situation that follows either exists or is likely exist: <u>What else</u> has changed? <u>Was it</u> hard to go back to work then? <u>Do you</u> worry about the future at all? (b) Underlined words imply a causal or other relationship between the items: How has this memory <u>affected</u> your life? Is the relationship <u>important</u> to the outcome?
Evaluation	The interviewer expresses an <i>opinion or evaluation, or raises a doubt or objection</i> about something said by the interviewee.	May serve to undermine the interviewee's opinions or confidence in the value of their own experience and thus make them more susceptible to later leading questions and statements.	Really, nothing's changed? Goodness, that's incredible! Exactly right!

Significantly, clean questions *exclude* the three features of leading questions that might be overlooked or regarded as 'innocent' – introduced content, leading presuppositions and evaluation. Presuppositions or content other than the interviewee's or 'universal logic' makes questions more likely to influence the response and affect the authorship of interview data.

How do researchers know how clean a question is? The cleanness rating

The intention to ask clean questions while laudable is insufficient. It does not guarantee that the questions asked during an interview are non-leading. The features of leading questions can be subtle and so it is important to carefully assess the relative freedom or constraint afforded by each question. The cleanness rating is a framework for classifying interviewer interventions into one of six categories, according to the extent of their potential influence on interviewee responses (see Table 2.2). It was originally designed to test the value of clean language as a research method (Tosey et al., 2014) and is derived from theory and practice.

**Table 2.2 The six categories in the cleanness rating
(Adapted from Cairns-Lee, Lawley & Tosey, 2021)**

Cleanness Rating Category	Description of Category
Classically Clean	A question that only makes use of near-universal constructs together with interviewee content. Such a question will use a variant of classically clean questions (listed in Chapter 1 Table 1.1) to direct attention to a particular aspect of the interviewee’s experience for further exploration.
Clean Repeat	An accurate recap of interviewee’s words that has no introduced content, presupposition or evaluation, nor does it ask a question.
Contextually Clean	<i>Topically clean:</i> A question which introduces the interview topic while minimizing superfluous content and presupposition. <i>Logically clean:</i> A question (other than classically clean) that remains within the logic of the interviewee’s descriptions and does not introduce interviewer content, presupposition or evaluation.
Mildly Leading	A question or statement that suggests or implies an answer or way of answering (due to the presence of introduced content, presupposition or evaluation). Although they have the potential to lead away from the interviewee’s lifeworld and compromise the authorship of the interviewee’s answers, the interviewee’s response does not indicate that they were led by the question and there is no reason to doubt the authorship of the response.
Strongly Leading	A question or statement that strongly suggests or implies an answer or way of answering (due to the presence of introduced content, presupposition or evaluation). When the response of the interviewee follows the interviewer’s lead, there is reason to doubt the authorship of their response.
Other	A non-leading comment (such as aha, mm-hmm, okay) that encourages the interviewee to continue and indicates the interviewer is paying attention; or a statement/question about the interview process; or a response to an interviewee question during the interview.

The rating can be applied at an individual question and at an interview level. It can be particularly useful to researchers who wish to review and refine their interview questions during a pilot phase (Young et al., 2018). It is also valuable to review the questions actually asked in an interview. This enables interviewers to become aware of leading features of their questions and to become more reflexive about the kinds of questions they use and the potential this has to affect the authorship of data. Furthermore, use of the rating offers

researchers the choice of whether to include data that are likely to have been led by the interviewer or at least to note this possibility in research reports.

Below we illustrate the application of the cleanness rating to an interview transcript. This extract was chosen not in order to criticize, but to illustrate how interviewer questions can unwittingly introduce content not originating with the interviewee and incorporate leading presuppositions – even in a key instructional textbook that “illustrates the open-ended interview process in phenomenological research” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 115).

The extract is taken from a phenomenological exploration of anger and the interviewer (E) starts with the instruction: “Try to remember one of the last times you were angry and tell me about the situation, how you felt and acted, and what you said.” The interviewee (S) responds, “The last time I was mad it was at my grandmother” and goes on to explain the situation. The interview continues as shown in Table 2.3 with the cleanness rating and commentary for each interviewer intervention. Since we cannot know how an interviewee would have responded if asked another question, we need to examine the interviewee’s prior and subsequent responses to consider the evidence for the influence of the question on the authorship of the data.

**Table 2.3 Application of the Cleanness Rating to an Interview Transcript
(Moustakas, 1994, p.115)**

Q No.	Transcript	Cleanness Rating and Comments
2	E: Do you do or say anything when she starts doing that?	<i>Contextually clean</i> since no new content is introduced and the question is congruent with the interviewee’s logic and offers freedom for them to respond from their experience.
	S: I never say anything when she does it, cause I know how to keep my mouth shut; she just likes to hear herself talk. So I just say to myself, ‘Let her talk and she’ll have to shut up sooner or later.’	
3	E: While you’re angry you said that you think of how you hate her, then later you tell yourself you’re going to get away. Do you cool off by telling yourself that?	<i>Strongly leading.</i> The introduced content defines the interviewee’s experience in three ways: (1) ‘you think of how you hate her’ includes the notion that S ‘hates’ her grandmother; (2) ‘you tell yourself you’re going to get away’ specifies her internal dialogue; and (3) ‘cool off’ is an interviewer-introduced metaphor for her emotions. The leading nature of this intervention is reinforced by two kinds of presupposition: (1) Structural – starting a question, ‘Do you ...’ presupposes that the situation that follows could or does exist; and (2) Logical – ‘while’ and ‘then later’ presuppose a temporal sequence that was not present in S’s prior responses.

	S: Yes. I say, Well, sooner or later you'll be away from here, so –	S's 'yes' confirms the interviewer's assumptions yet there is a strong possibility S is being compliant, especially given she has said 'I know how to keep my mouth shut'.
4	E: Do you say or do anything when you get angry at other people?	<i>Mildly leading.</i> The 'Do you ... when ...' syntax in this question creates a presuppositions that S gets angry at other people even though she has not yet said that. NB. A cleaner question would have been: 'And you get mad at your grandmother, and what happens with other people?'
	S: I cry sometimes. When they really say something to you, you just go up to your room and just say, 'Why does it have to be me living in this house with these people?' And you just cry over it and it's better after you finish crying.	
5	E: Do you ever talk back?	<i>Strongly leading.</i> The question introduces the behaviour, 'talk back' using, for the fourth time, the potentially leading structure 'Do you...'. In addition, the 'ever' widens the scope of the question to such an extent that it might be hard for S to say it never happens.
	S: Sometimes, usually she doesn't hear me cause if she heard me it would be all over –	The leading features in the question raise the possibility that S's 'sometimes' may be accommodating the interviewer's presuppositions.
6	E: What is this feeling like, that you have to let something out?	<i>Strongly leading.</i> The interviewer again defines S's experience, this time as a 'feeling' that 'you have let something out' (a metaphor). The 'have to' contained in this suggestion adds a logical presupposition that in some way S is compelled to 'let something out'. This is an example of a leading open question because it introduces the interviewer's assumptions that 'you have to let something out'.
	S: Because if you don't, well, I feel like it has to come out; I either talk to somebody or I cry or say to myself, "You're going to get out of here." Because if you don't it's all going to build up.	The authorship of S's statement, 'I feel like it has to come out' is open to doubt since it so closely resembles the interviewer's suggestions embedded in question 6.

It is useful to mention the role of clean repeats, which are not shown in the example transcript. Clean repeats accurately recap a selection of the interviewee's content and serve to let the interviewee know that they have been carefully listened to. Furthermore, the repetition helps interviewees to hear their own words which encourages further reflection and may reduce the need for a question. Clean repeats also sensitize the interviewer to the precise form of the interviewee's account, especially their implicit metaphors which carry information about how a person is thinking. They do not paraphrase because paraphrasing is

one way in which an interviewer introduces content and modifies the meaning of interviewees (as discussed in chapter 1).

The assignment of interventions to a category requires practice and discernment – in our experience allocating interviewer interventions to the classically clean, clean repeat and other categories is relatively straightforward. However, we have found it useful to discuss questions at the boundaries between contextually clean, mildly leading and strongly leading with colleagues. It should be noted that identifying the appropriate category is not a technical process but a craft that needs to consider the contextual, relational and discursive nature of interviews.

To indicate how clean or leading an interviewer's questions and interventions are, we recommend that one or more independent raters, preferably with some familiarity with clean language, review a few interview transcripts at an early stage in a research study using the cleanness rating. This provides an opportunity for researchers to increase their understanding of the influence of their questions on the data produced in the interview. Following completion of the interviews in a study, the rating can be applied to all interviewer interventions and the results displayed in a table, which can identify features of leading questions in interviews, supporting the on-going development of the interviewer.

In a review of studies conducted by experienced practitioners of clean language interviewing Nehyba & Lawley (2020) found that the proportion of clean to leading interventions was approximately 90% in a clean category and 10% in a leading category. This proportion is offered as a guideline and not a prescriptive standard to attain. We emphasize that whilst the figures can be useful to provide insight into the relative use of clean or leading questions, the main purpose of the cleanness rating is to enhance reflexivity amongst qualitative researchers. It enables them to identify and reflect on the potential influence of their questions on the production of data and to account for their role in the interview. This enhances confidence in their findings since interviewers are able to trace the influence of their questions on the authorship of data. As noted earlier, the degree to which the influence of interviewer's assumptions is a concern will be related to the interviewer's epistemological stance. It is particularly relevant to phenomenological studies.

There are four important caveats to make about the cleanness rating. First, no interview can be devoid of the interviewer's influence. Moreover, clean and leading are not mutually exclusive or dichotomous, rather they are indicative of a continuum of relative constraint or freedom for interviewees to respond from their own lifeworld. Second, the cleanness rating is not intended to be followed mechanistically or unreflectively. Its purpose is to make the role of the interviewer more transparent and more reflexive about data collection in interviewing. Third, clean language questions and use of the rating process requires training, feedback and a period of apprenticeship to develop the requisite skills and sensitivity. We suggest this is a relevant investment for researchers who depend on interviewing for data collection. Fourth, we recommend that the cleanness rating is most effective when applied by more than one rater, preferably at least one of whom is trained in or well-informed about Clean Language. This will increase the possibility that rater blindspots (out-of-awareness assumptions) will be identified and thereby produce a more considered rating.

The cleanness rating represents an innovation in qualitative research as a systematic method to assess the influence of interview questions on the authorship of data through considering the many ways questions may subtly lead and constrain interviewees responses.

In summary, the cleanness rating offers four main benefits:

1. Awareness of the features of leading questions enables researchers to translate into behavioral practice exhortations to ask non-leading questions. This knowledge can inform the design of questions, both when drawing up interview protocols and in the spontaneous generation of questions during an interview.
2. Enhanced researcher reflexivity (Cassell et al., 2018) through an increased understanding of how interviewers' questions may influence interviewees' answers, albeit unintentionally.
3. Enhanced methodological transparency (Aguinis et al., 2018) by making the questions used in an interview available for systematic scrutiny of the extent to which interviewers introduce their own assumptions in the form of content, presupposition and evaluation, thereby making the role of the interviewer more transparent.
4. A method for researchers to enhance trustworthiness in authorship and provide evidenced claims about knowledge from data. (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2020).

Conclusion

In summary this chapter has identified the importance of identifying the authorship of data and the overlooked problem of leading questions in interviewing to raise awareness of the ways in which interviewers, even those experienced in the craft, may unintentionally lead interviewee answers through their questions. It has introduced a nuanced typology of three ways that researchers may, unwittingly, lead in interviews through introducing content, presuppositions and evaluations which narrow the scope of possible response for interviewees. Recognising that the intention to avoid non-leading questions is useful but insufficient we describe the cleanness rating as a method to review the questions actually asked in interviews as a method to make the role of the interviewer more transparent and evaluate the potential influence of their interview questions on the authorship of data. This is especially important for interviews in which researchers aim to bracket their assumptions but it can be applied to any kind of interview in which there is a need to show confidence in the authorship of data. Furthermore, the practice of using the cleanness rating can enhance researchers' reflexivity through understanding how their questions can influence interviewees and the authorship of interview data.

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