

## Chapter 2

# The Psychology of Asking Questions

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Survey results are only as meaningful as the answers respondents provide. This chapter addresses how respondents come up with an answer by reviewing the cognitive and communicative processes underlying survey responses. Following an overview of respondents' tasks, we focus on issues of question comprehension and illustrate how respondents infer the intended meaning of a question from contextual variables. Next, we address problems of autobiographical memory and their implications for behavioral reports, paying particular attention to respondents' inference and estimation strategies. Finally, we turn to attitude questions and identify the variables that determine the emergence, direction (assimilation vs. contrast) and size of question order effects in attitude measurement. Throughout, we note how culture- and age-related differences in cognitive processing may give rise to culture-sensitive and age-sensitive context effects, which can undermine meaningful comparisons across cultures and cohorts.

### GLOSSARY OF KEY CONCEPTS

**Assimilation effect.** A catch-all term for any influence that makes the answers to two questions more similar than they otherwise would be; it does not entail specific assumptions about the underlying process.

**Backfire effect.** See contrast effect.

**Carry-over effect.** See assimilation effect.

**Context effect.** A catch-all term for any influence of the context in which a question is asked; it does not entail specific assumptions about the direction of the effect or the underlying process.

**Contrast effect.** A catch-all term for any influence that makes the answers to two questions more different than they otherwise would be; it does not entail specific assumptions about the underlying process.

**Pragmatic meaning.** Refers to the intended (rather than literal or semantic) meaning of an utterance and requires inferences about the speaker's knowledge and intentions.

**Primacy effect.** A given response alternative is more likely to be chosen when presented at the beginning rather than at the end of a list of response alternatives.

**Question order effect.** The order in which questions are asked influences the obtained answers; different processes can give rise to this influence.

**Recency effect.** A given response alternative is more likely to be chosen when presented at the end rather than at the beginning of a list of response alternatives.

**Response order effect.** The order in which response alternatives are presented influences which alternative is endorsed; see primacy effect and recency effect.

**Semantic meaning.** Refers to the literal meaning of words. Understanding the semantic meaning is insufficient for answering a question, which requires an understanding of the question's pragmatic meaning.