ASKING WHY ABOUT SOCIAL PROBLEMS: IDEOLOGY AND CAUSAL MODELS IN THE PUBLIC MIND

Allen H. Barton

When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist (Archbishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil).

ABSTRACT

In 'The Art of Asking Why' Paul Lazarsfeld (1935) pointed out the deficiency of simply asking people 'why' they did something, and developed the idea of accounting models to guide a more extensive series of questions about reasons for action. A similar problem arises when people are asked 'why' about social phenomena like unemployment, poverty, inflation, or urban riots. A review of research asking people for their explanations of social problems shows that open-ended responses are rarely probed to elicit the whole 'causal model' which the respondent has in mind; that closed-ended questions tend to offer limited choices, and not to explore the possibility of 'causal chains' or conditional effects; and that there is a tendency to classify answers into crude dichotomies rather than explore the public's ideas about specific causal mechanisms for social problems. Particular problems arise in studying elite belief systems since these are likely to be more elaborate than the public's. Content analysis of elite group discussions and elite media offer one avenue for studying such groups.

Almost 60 years ago, Paul Lazarsfeld published his famous article on 'The Art of Asking Why' (1935). His 'reason analysis' exploited the fact that people, unlike inanimate objects, are conscious of at least some of the motives and perceptions which enter into a willed action, and unlike laboratory animals, can be asked why they are doing what they do.

Lazarsfeld pointed out the complexity of the very idea of 'reasons' for action, and the need to structure the questioning around a kind of causal model of human action, which he called an 'accounting model.' An accounting model, constructed from exploratory interviews or past research, distinguishes causal elements in the action situation to guide the interview. For individual action, these include the actor's inner dispositions (such as desires or values), perceptions of the external situation in which action takes place (such as characteristics of the alternative objects of choice), and channels of influence on dispositions and...
perceptions, which may include the actor’s own observations, inter-personal
influence, and mass communications.

In Lazarsfeld’s writing and in his collection, *The Language of Social Research*
(Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg 1955), the idea of an ‘accounting model’ is developed
through many examples. The most common is a consumer or voter choice
model in which the elements are:

1. perceived attributes of product or candidate A;
2. perceived attributes of alternatives available;
3. channels of influence or communication about objects of choice;
4. motives, standards, or values of the chooser relevant to the decision.

Simply asking someone ‘Why did you choose A?’ could lead to an answer under
any of these headings, and the respondent is unlikely spontaneously to cover
all of them in reply to a single ‘why’ question. The result of such a survey will
be a list mainly of single answers, given by respondents using different frames
of reference, which cannot adequately describe each individual’s basis for action,
or the frequency with which each attribute, channel, and motive is considered
important by the sample. But starting with an adequate accounting model, one
develops questions to probe each of these elements of the choice situation, and
obtains answers which can be statistically analyzed to show how many people
mention each of the possibilities under each heading, and how they rate their
importance.

Another kind of ‘asking why’ occurs when public opinion researchers ask
people for their explanations of social phenomena. The questions may ask for
explanations of:

(a) general types of social behavior:
   ‘In your opinion, what are the most important causes of crime?’ (Iyengar
   1991, p. 21).
   ‘Which in your opinion is more to blame for crime and lawlessness in this
country—the individual or society?’ (Gallup 1970, in Erskine 1974, p. 294).
(b) the social conditions of particular groups:
   ‘Why are rich people rich? Why are poor people poor?’ (Rytina et al. 1970,
p. 713).
   ‘Who do you think is more to blame for the present conditions in which
Negroes find themselves—white people or Negroes themselves? (Gallup
(c) collective events and conditions:
   ‘What do you think are the two or three main reasons riots have broken
out in this country?’ (Harris 1967, in Erskine 1967-68, p. 665).
   ‘Why do you think prices have gone up as much as they have over the
past couple of years?’ (Kinder and Mebane 1983, p. 150).

Asking ‘why’ about social phenomena has very different implications from questioning individuals about the motives and influences which lead to their own actions. Respondents cannot answer simply from introspection, but have to use their information about the society around them. The theoretical and methodological bases for research on public explanations of social phenomena are still primitive.

This paper will look at actual research practices in studying people’s explanations of social phenomena. It will point to the problems arising from different forms of question and of response, the use of ‘accounting models’ in organizing questions and answers, the limitations of factor analysis and dichotomous classifications of responses for the representation of belief systems, the ways in which question formulation can bias responses toward individual or social explanations of a problem, and the problems of studying explanations among elites.

THE USE OF ACCOUNTING MODELS IN STUDYING PUBLIC EXPLANATIONS

Open-ended Questions and Accounting Models

Asking the public ‘why’ about social phenomena raises some problems quite similar to those Lazarsfeld found in asking why about individual behavior. Open-ended questions tend to get single responses unless carefully probed to reveal multi-causal explanations; and even when several causal factors are named, their causal links to one another are seldom explored. We are usually left with responses which only cover single links in what a social scientist would see as a set of causal chains leading from past circumstances and policies to the present situation and onto future outcomes.

Some of these problems emerged in the survey on public attitudes toward the Norwegian economy on which I worked in 1949 (Barton 1957, 1971). The study was designed by a research group at what later became the Institut for Samfunnsforskning in Oslo, and carried out by FAKTA under the direction of Leif Holbaek-Hanssen. It took place four years after the country was liberated from Nazi occupation, and after the first four years of Labor government.

Respondents were asked three open-ended questions. The first had an indefinite time-frame, and asked about negative influences on the economy:

1. ‘What do you think is the main reason for the difficulties this country has had to contend with regarding the supplies of goods, clothing, etc.?’
The second asked about positive factors in the economy, also with an indefinite time-frame:

2. 'What do you think is the main reason we are as well off as we are here in this country?'

The third asked about current factors which could be manipulated to improve the economy:

3. 'What do you think should be done today so that people will be better off with regard to food and clothing?'

The questions were not probed, so most respondents gave only one answer to each. There were lots of Don't Knows—so many among the women respondents that the analysis of the open-ended items had to be restricted to men. Most of all we did not start with any kind of accounting model for the economic situation, so the questionnaire did not include probes asking the respondent to specify, for a given 'cause' mentioned, what factors led up to that cause, and through what intervening processes that cause was connected to the problem to be explained.

Nonetheless after the fact I arranged the responses roughly in a causal sequence, as indicated by the arrows in Figure 1. Since we did not ask the respondents through what process the factors they mentioned would affect consumer goods supply, and what led to each factor, we do not know whether these causal connections were in the mind of the respondent. We also do not know how many people would have offered multifactor explanations or recommendations, had they been asked to go beyond their first answer. Taken collectively however the answers were revealing.

The first question's indefinite time-frame allowed some people to go back in the causal chain to a historical factor: the war-time loss of capital and production (Figure 1a). The lack of foreign exchange to buy imports was the most widely recognized present source of the problem, which reflected Norwegians' awareness of their small country's heavy dependence on trade; but there are few efforts to explain the foreign exchange shortage aside from the historical factor of the war losses.

The question 'why is the country as well off as it is?' could also have called up historical factors, but in fact was answered only in terms of post-war policies and group activities, and necessarily only factors perceived as having positive effects on the economy. The main social actors—government, business, labor, and American Marshall aid—appeared to varying numbers of Norwegians as positive factors for the economy.

The question of 'What can be done today' to improve consumer supplies necessarily focused on present factors considered subject to change. There is an
implication that the factors mentioned are inadequate at present, that somebody should be doing something more or differently.

The formulation of each ‘causal’ question thus sharply influenced the factors
selected in the answer, and without all three we would have a very incomplete picture of the public's mental models of the economy.

When the answers were tabulated separately for different economic classes, there are interesting similarities and differences. All classes blamed the war losses for current problems; all emphasized the need for more foreign exchange (Figure 1a). But more business owners mentioned the Labor government's policies as a cause of shortages. They also mentioned 'low productivity,' while workers rarely mentioned this; perhaps low productivity was taken to mean low worker effort, not bad management.

Conversely a majority of workers mentioned the Labor government's policies when giving reasons why things were as good as they were (Figure 1b). Only 1/6 of business owners (a class which voted heavily for the opposition) credited government policies with good results; almost twice that many mentioned the American Marshall Plan aid. Some businessmen also mentioned 'no strikes,' while few workers took credit for this, perhaps because they were ambivalent about their own unions' no strike policy.

Workers had a high rate of 'don't know' on recommendations for increasing supplies (Figure 1c). 'Higher production' without any specific means of getting it was their next most frequent answer. Businessmen's most frequent proposal was also 'higher production.' Their second most frequent answer, 'less taxes and controls,' presumably was their favored means of raising production. Respondents' failure to explain how to get higher production was most likely a failure of the interview design: the interviewer was not instructed to ask 'And what should be done to get that?'

The models used by economists at the time all emphasized the high investment rate as an immediate cause of the consumer goods shortage, as well as its eventual remedy. This was mentioned by only 2 percent of both the workers and the presumably better educated businessmen as a cause of the shortages. The models in the minds of the public clearly did not correspond to those of the economists. It is notable that virtually nobody proposed decreasing investment to increase consumption, and some proposed increasing it, which clearly would have the opposite effect in the short run. The question needed to specify a time horizon for the improvement of living standards so that all respondents would have a similar time frame of reference.

This example of open-ended questions asking explanations of a social phenomenon suffered the weakness that (in spite of Lazarsfeld's involvement in the study, and my own apprenticeship with him) there was no 'accounting model' set up in advance, with questions probing for perceptions of each element in the model, and for connections between the elements. The group aggregates of answers to call three questions nonetheless revealed class interests and ideologies, but the picture would have been far better with more adequate questions.
Reasons given by workers for the country's being well off as it is.

Reasons given by business owners for the country's being well off as it is.

Figure 1b Reasons for country being as well off as it is, Norway 1949

An Accounting Model From a Focus-group Discussion

Discovering the causal models in people’s minds is clearly a timeconsuming process, since it takes several questions and much probing to bring out all the variables and relationships which the respondent has in mind, with due care not to suggest answers. One approach is to use tape-recorded 'focus group' discussions and code the statements into a causal model. This was done by Antaki.
Figures 1a and 1b depict recommendations for increasing the supply of consumer goods, with separate diagrams for workers' and business owners' perspectives. The diagrams show various suggestions, such as continued planning and control, higher wages, lower prices, more imports, more investment, less armament, and more consumer goods, with some respondents indicating 'don't know' (36% for workers, 19% for business owners).

The article mentions a study by Tomlinson (1985) discussing the high rate of unemployment among eight British academics who formed the Social Democratic party. The researcher noted the use of 'moderately elaborate causal networks.'
Synthesizing ideas from the eight respondents for the causes of unemployment he reported an overall causal model.

Since all the respondents were from one ideological party, the synthesis makes sense; in a more diverse group, competing models would have to be created. Group discussions don't necessarily allow us to ascertain each individual's causal model, and may well influence members' ideas.

**AN ACCOUNTING MODEL FROM A 'CAUSAL MATRIX QUESTIONNAIRE'**

Campbell and Muncer (1990) used a 'causal matrix' questionnaire to uncover a 'lay model' of the causes of crime. Students in introductory psychology were first asked an open-ended question: 'Please list in the spaces provided below the six major causes of crime in the United States.' This gave rise to 182 'causes' which were classified into 33 categories.

'The 10 most commonly cited causes taken from the pilot study were poverty, mental illness, lack of education, drug use, broken or bad family, greed, unemployment, peer pressure, bad neighborhood, and feelings of anger or revenge.'

The researchers then tried to find out how these ten 'causes of crime' related to one another. 'These variables were used to label the 10 rows and 10 columns of a matrix. The rows were labeled "causes" and the columns "possible effects"' (Campbell and Muncer 1990. p. 413). The subjects were told that this was a list of ten 'possible reasons for crime,' and they were asked to judge whether each of the variables down the side of the matrix was likely to effect each of the others. The result was a 'lay model for causes of crime' which represented all causal chains on which there was some minimum degree of consensus.

The researchers did not include 'crime' in their matrix. They implicitly locate 'crime' at the end-point of the path model, but it is not clear whether
the three variables on the right are the only ones directly linked to crime by respondents, or whether some of the other variables had both direct and indirect paths to crime. The researchers used a 'network analysis' procedure on the answers to find a consensual model of crime causation rather than allowing for a differentiation of individuals who might have varied theories of crime. However the 'matrix questionnaire' is clearly a useful technique for exploring either individual or 'consensual' causal models in the public mind.

There do not seem to be any examples of using a 'causal matrix questionnaire' on general public samples, although it would seem practical as a handout to be filled out by respondents under an interviewer's guidance, or a part of a mailed questionnaire.

**ASKING RESPONDENTS TO RATE ITEMS IN A LIST OF 'CAUSES'**

Kinder and Mebane argue:

People possess and can articulate beliefs about the causes of and responsibilities for economic circumstances—their own and the country's. Such beliefs constitute what we will call 'ordinary economic theory.' However unsophisticated or peculiar they may seem to economists, such theories should reveal a great deal about the connections people make, and fail to make, between their own economic circumstances, the economic circumstances of the nation, and the performance of the government (Kinder and Mebane 1983, p. 141).

They added a 'set of questions designed to reveal theories about inflation' to the March 1979 University of Michigan Survey of Consumers, six years after the 1973 OPEC oil price shock started a major price-wage spiral, and just before the second doubling of oil prices. An open-ended question asked:
**Table 1** Causes of inflation I, U.S. 1979

*Question:* 'Why do you think prices have gone up as much as they have over the past couple of years?' (Open-ended)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response categories</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy costs</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage increases</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer 'greed'</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big business</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflation</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unions</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance of trade</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage-price spirals</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note* the much higher acceptance of each 'cause' when it is suggested to the respondent compared to its frequency of mention on the open-ended question, and the acceptance of some causes not reported at all as open-ended responses.
Table 2 Causes of inflation II, U.S. 1979

*Question:* 'There may have been several causes of inflation during the past couple of years. For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you think this has increased inflation a great deal, somewhat, a little, or not at all.'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>A great deal</th>
<th>Increased inflation</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost of oil and other kinds of energy</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington spending more than it takes in</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington printing money with nothing to back it up</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups receiving unfairly large wage increases</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesses raising prices to increase their profits</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing interest rates</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumers buying products they don't really need</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government spending money to keep down unemployment</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N = 769. 'Don't know' responses (average n = 17) excluded.


(Table 2). The figures suggest that the respondents tended to agree with almost any explanation offered them, although with varying degrees of enthusiasm. It is not clear whose 'models' of inflation the researchers used in formulating this list of possible causes. Was the list the product of 'lay theories' uncovered in exploratory interviews, or of discussions with economists? Furthermore there was no effort to ask how one 'causal factor' might be related to another—they were all treated as directly affecting inflation rather than linked in causal chains.

The answers were factor analyzed, which showed one 'governmental' cluster (deficit spending, printing money, spending against unemployment) and one 'nongovernmental' cluster (business raising prices, wage increases, interest rates, and 'consumer greed'). The 'cost of oil' ended up in the 'governmental' cluster: those who blamed the government rather than domestic social groups were also
Table 3  Who or what is to blame for unemployment in this country?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question: ‘Would you place a lot of the blame or not much blame for unemployment on...’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent answering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'A lot of blame'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High interest rates?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition from foreign products?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The high cost of labor in this country?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor business management?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Democratic policies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald Reagan's policies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was done to reduce inflation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People not wanting to work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People not having the right kind of skills?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


More likely to blame OPEC. Interest rates on the other hand were not seen as 'government' policy.

The sample was then partitioned into holders of government-oriented and non-government-oriented causal theories. The respondent's ratings of the state of the national economy had a significantly stronger effect on rating of then-president Carter among those whose 'economic theory' emphasized government as a cause of and as responsible for dealing with the inflation.

This is clearly a useful finding since it suggests that 'theories' of the cause and cure for inflation influenced support of the President. However the methods of asking and analyzing both the open-ended questions and the closed questions on causes permit only a very crude classification of respondents 'theories'.

A CBS survey January 16–19, 1983, had people rate 9 reasons for unemployment, at a time of high unemployment due to the 'tight money' policy adopted in 1980 by the Federal Reserve Board to reduce a very high inflation rate (de Boer 1983, p. 438) (Table 3).

Here again we miss the linkages between the proposed causes, including possible contradictory effects. Was the high cost of labor seen as causing inflation which required raising interest rates? Just how did previous Democratic policies, or Ronald Reagan's policies, lead to unemployment—was it through some of the other variables listed, such as foreign competition or high interest rates? Whose fault is it that people don’t have the right kinds of skills?

A more focused study of beliefs about inflation by Sieber (1963, 1964) asked union members 'What, in your opinion, has been the main reason for the rising costs of living in recent years?' Responses were classified as emphasizing
‘wage-push,’ company pricing and profit policies, or other factors. He showed that acceptance of the ‘wage-push’ theory, especially if combined with attributing some blame to their own union, was related to willingness to forgo or minimize wage demands. The causal beliefs in turn were related to relative exposure to union versus commercial news media.

FORCED-CHOICE QUESTIONS ABOUT CAUSES

An even cruder picture of the public’s causal theories is given when we ask them simply to choose between two broad classes of causes of some situation.

The unemployment rate among young black people is 17%, among young white people it is 9%.

(a) Is this because black people are too lazy to work?
(b) Is this because white bosses discriminate against black people? (Hewstone and Jaspars 1983, p. 5).

It is fairly obvious that forcing people to choose between explaining black unemployment by ‘black people are too lazy’ and ‘white bosses discriminate’ leaves out not only the possibility that both factors operate, but that many other factors are involved. However the function of these ‘oversimplified’ attribution items was simply to serve as indicators of the effects of group discussion on race attitudes, in an experiment involving black and white young people in Britain. They were not being used to actually explore the causal thinking of the subjects in any detail.

Followup questions can help elaborate causal beliefs. Schuman reports results of a question asked of 2,584 whites in 15 cities in 1968:

On the average, Negroes in this city have worse jobs, education, and housing than white people. Do you think this is due mainly to Negroes having been discriminated against, or mainly due to something about Negroes themselves? (Schuman 1971).

This resulted in 54 percent answering ‘mainly due to something about Negroes themselves,’ 19 percent mainly discrimination, and another 19 percent volunteering that it was a combination of the two, while 4 percent answered ‘Don’t Know.’ Obviously the ‘combination’ response would have been much higher if it had been offered in the questions.

Because the forced-choice question left unclear the nature of the ‘individual factors’ which cause more Negroes to be badly off than whites, the researchers followed up with an open-ended question, asked of the 73 percent who answered ‘mainly something about Negroes themselves’ or who volunteered that it was both:

‘What is it about Negroes themselves that makes them have worse jobs, education, and housing?’
Table 4 Characteristics of Negroes which explain poverty (U.S. 1968)

**Question:** 'What is it about Negroes themselves that makes them have worse jobs, education, and housing?'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responses that suggest genetic explanations of Negro disadvantage (e.g. 'low mental ability')</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses that may indicate environmental explanations (other than discrimination) of Negro disadvantage (e.g. 'lack of education')</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses that suggest lack of motivation as explanation of Negro disadvantage—no indication of genetic or environmental cause</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know, not ascertained</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question:** 'Do you think Negroes are just born that way and can't change, or that changes in the Negro are possible?'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Born that way and can't change</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes are possible</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N = 1,886.
Source: Schuman 1971.

This was immediately followed by an agree–disagree question focusing on genetic explanations:

'Do you think Negroes are just born that way and can't change, or that changes in the Negro are possible? (Table 4).

The author develops an interpretation of white attitudes as strongly rooted in the 'free will' tradition of American culture, which holds that in our open society anyone, including non-whites, can get ahead if they put out enough effort. On this basis he concludes:

Much of the white public not only does not think in scientific terms about race; it does not even think in pseudo-scientific terms. . . . In espousing free will, white Americans deny the reality of the problems faced by black Americans and thus place the whole burden of black disadvantage on blacks themselves. . . . Most of all, white Americans do not understand that individual free will operates and has its beneficial effects only within institutional contexts that give it efficacy and purpose (Schuman 1971).
In spite of the use of followup questions, the tendency to dichotomous thinking on the part of the analyst remains. After all, one quarter of these 'free-will' respondents also specifically volunteered that there was a combination of discrimination and lack of motivation. It is also very likely that some of the 54 percent who answered 'mainly due to something about Negroes themselves' also recognized some element of discrimination or other environmental factors—does 'mainly' leave no significant role to environment? So it seems a little excessive to argue that those who 'espouse free will' are placing the whole burden on blacks themselves, or that 'the logic of causal inquiry ... plays little or no part in public thinking about white and black differences in status and achievement.' More open-ended followups and less 'lumping' in analysis might have revealed a more complex causal model in white beliefs.

FACTOR ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO LISTS OF 'CAUSES'

Sniderman et al. (1986, 1991) examined 'Reasoning chains: causal models of policy reasoning in mass publics.' They argue:

Whether people are knowledgeable or not, they do work out positions on political issues; and the question that we should like to explore is how they manage to do that. ... Decisions about what position to take on a political issue are complex decisions; and because of this complexity they need to be simplified if they are to be managed effectively. ... What we would like to do here is to focus on some of the means for simplification, or heuristics, that citizens use to figure out their positions on particular political issues (Sniderman et al. 1986, p. 405).

In the study they analyze, respondents were offered six explanations of racial inequality in America; concern with 'yea-saying' by people with no real opinions led the researchers to eliminate 16 percent of respondents who agreed with all or all but one of the explanations—a measure of the dangers of the 'checklist' approach to studying perceptions of causes. The responses of the 84 percent considered to have real opinions formed a single 'internal/external cause' factor along which respondents can be located.

Explanations of poverty in general were also asked. These were found to have two factors, one 'lack of opportunity,' the other 'lack of effort,' which were virtually uncorrelated in an oblique analysis which did not require them to be orthogonal. In other words there were many who accepted both internal and external explanations of poverty, and some who scored low on both—unlike beliefs on race where internal and external explanations tended to be mutually exclusive. The 'free will' ideology is not as simple as Schuman's 1971 paper proposed.
These causal-idea factors for race and poverty were then used, along with political liberalism—conservatism and affect toward blacks, in a path analysis of the causes of support or opposition to government policies to promote racial equality in general. Both causal ideas were shown to have direct or indirect effects on policy attitudes.

The practice of factor analyzing responses to checklists of causes and coming up with one or two broad scales representing ‘individualistic ideology’ and ‘social-structural ideology’ has both uses and costs. These generic ideologies seem to be well established by the item inter-correlations (although as we see on some issues they form one and on other issues two largely independent dimensions). They have proved to be useful in explaining support for policies.

However these broad ideological dichotomies imply a very crude kind of causal modeling on the part of the public: either ‘society’ or ‘the individual’ is to blame for poverty, crime, unemployment, etc. and this ideological dichotomy explains support or opposition to an undifferentiated set of ‘racial equality policies.’

Furthermore the researchers did not allow the respondents themselves to explain why they supported the policies they did, to draw their own ‘reasoning chains.’ The researchers inferred ‘reasoning chains’ from the fact that one attitude predicts another in a multiple regression. They argue that their path model linking broader and presumably prior attitudes, including ‘causal theories’ simplified into one or two dimensions (‘internal/external’), to race policy positions represents the causal model which the respondents have in mind when they support or oppose government policies. It would be most interesting to see whether appropriate questioning of the respondents would lead them consciously to express the reasoning chains suggested by the regressions.

In an analysis of attitudes toward ‘race-targeted’ vs. ‘class-targeted’ policies by Bobo and Kluegel (1993), similar causal-theory factors were important for policy support. However Bobo and Kluegel’s analysis distinguished ‘race targeted’ and ‘income targeted’ policies and showed important differences in the social bases of their support. If we want to analyze support and opposition to more specified social and economic policies, we will have to go beyond broad ideological and policy dichotomies to examine more detailed causal models in the minds of the public.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS REDUCED TO A DICHOTOMY

In a series of studies of the influence of television on public thinking, the crucial variable has been how people see the causes of social problems such as crime, terrorism, poverty, unemployment, and racial inequality (Iyengar 1991).
For each issue, attributions of causal and treatment responsibility were elicited with open-ended survey questions. Specifically, individuals were asked, 'In your opinion, what are the most important causes of ——?' They were then asked, 'If you were asked to suggest ways to reduce ——, what would you suggest?' Each individual was allowed to answer freely, without prompting. Up to four separate responses were coded for each question. (pp. 20–1).

It appears that no effort was made to ask people to elaborate on their answers by inquiring about prior causes of the factors mentioned, or about the processes by which these factors influenced the end result. Therefore in spite of the open-ended format, specific 'causal models in people's heads' were not obtained. However the analysis was not aimed at explaining choice of specific causes or policy proposals, but rather at a broad dichotomy between individual and social responsibility. The hypothesis of the study was that different 'framing' of television news stories—the 'episodic' versus the 'thematic', the individualized case reportage versus the examination of the general problem in a wider framework—would make for more individualistic or social attributions of the problems. For this purpose, the method of questioning and of coding answers was quite sufficient. And it produced some striking findings about the effects of typical news 'framing' on television: that in general the 'episodic' news stories generate individualistic attributions, while 'thematic' stories generate more social attributions. The author concludes that:

By diverting attention from societal and governmental responsibility, episodic framing glosses over national problems and allows public officials to ignore problems whose remedies entail burdens to their constituents. Television news may well prove to be the opiate of American society (Iyengar 1991, p. 143).

The limitation of these methods, like those of forced-choice questions and of factor analysis of responses, is the reduction of public theories to the two categories of individualist conservatism and social liberalism. The last 30 years experience with the failure of the 'war on poverty,' the continuing problems of racial economic inequality and crime, and the failure of both Keynesianism and Reaganomics to solve the inflation–unemployment tradeoff, reflect the need for both élites and the public to think discriminatingly about which social causes are most important and which social remedies are effective. It may be that such details are beyond the capacity of the general public, or that the political leaders, the educational system, the news media, and the organized social movements have failed to communicate them to the public. However if the researcher's very methods reduce public causal thinking to simple dichotomous models of 'social activism vs. laissez-faire,' we will never find out.
ASKING WHY ABOUT SOCIAL PROBLEMS

EXPLAINING INDIVIDUAL FATES VS. COLLECTIVE PHENOMENA

There is a fundamental ambiguity in asking 'why are rich people rich?' and 'why are poor people poor?' or 'why are people unemployed?' Are we asking why, given the institutional situation, some people are in one slot or another of the structure, or are we asking why society is set up to have rich people, poor people, and unemployment? Some question wordings may focus attention on individual characteristics, others on social factors. If we are in effect asking why some people are unemployed or poor or homeless or rich and successful in the given economic situation, we should not be surprised to get many choices of 'laziness,' 'drunkenness,' 'lack of ability' for occupancy of bottom positions, and 'ability, hard work,' for the top positions.

On the other hand if one asks about rates of social problems, and differences in these rates between times and places, people mention mainly social causes. A British sample was asked, at the peak of the Thatcher-induced depression:

Unemployment is currently running at its highest level since the 1930s. What do you think is mainly to blame for this? (NOP, Great Britain, 1980, in de Boer 1983).

The answers were virtually all in terms of 'societal' or policy variables at the collective level: 'the government' is to blame, 'unions,' 'high wage demands,' 'world recession,' 'high interest rates,' 'public spending cuts,' etc. It would be ridiculous to attribute a tripling of the rate of unemployment to a sudden epidemic of laziness, drunkenness, and low ability, although some economists have tried to do just this, arguing that there was a change in the workers' 'taste' for unemployment (see also studies by Furnham 1982a, b; Furnham and Hesketh 1989).

Many published studies fail to give the wording of the question which preceded the checklist of reasons to be rated, or which produced the open-ended responses. This makes it hard to judge the individual vs. collective frame of reference set by the question.

The frame of reference is also shifted to collective factors if we ask not for causes but for remedies. Another British study asked: 'How do you think unemployment could be reduced?' (Lewis and Furnham 1986, 78). The answers to this open-ended question were classified as shown in Table 5.

Very few people proposed 'changing attitudes,' a category which in any case included 'industry must have a more competitive attitude,' and 'become a less technological society' as well as 'encourage people to work harder.'

Questions which ask for a comparison of rates across places or times necessarily shift the focus to structural and away from individual failings. Rytina, Form and Pease (1970) asked for explanations of why people were on relief during
the Great Depression, and during the past six years (1962–68, when the unemployment rate was around 4 percent).

Only about 5 percent of the total sample thought that people were on relief during the Great Depression because of personal attributes. But four-fifths of the rich and three-fifths of the middle-income whites thought that relief status in the past six years was the result of personal characteristics, while less than half of those in other strata thought so (Rytina et al. 1970, p. 714).

For poor black respondents, belief that personal attributes were the cause of being on relief in the 1960s was below 30 percent, perhaps because they felt that they were still living in a ‘Great Depression.’ (Rytina et al. 1970, p. 713).

These questions emphasizing changes in rates or finding solutions are as naturally ‘biased’ toward structural or societal variables, as questions asking why ‘people’ are poor or rich are biased toward individualistic explanations. As Kinder and Mebane (1983) point out: ‘Nearly invisible in theories of personal economic predicaments, government becomes very prominent in the accounts people offer of the country’s economic predicaments.’ (Kinder and Mebane 1983, p. 149).

This distinction between the causal models used to account for one’s own economic problems and those of the country as a whole has real political consequences (Kinder and Mebane 1983; McAdam et al. 1988). Schlozman and Verba (1979) devote a book to the problem of the ‘political quiescence of the unemployed,’ with emphasis on how the unemployed explain their situation. On the other hand the public as a whole is not ‘quiescent’ when either inflation or unemployment reaches levels they consider intolerable: a large body of

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**Table 5 Remedies for British unemployment**

*Question:* ‘How do you think unemployment could be reduced?’

*(open-ended)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response categories</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stimulate the economy</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redistribute jobs</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military policy</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job creation</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change the government, union policies</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change attitudes</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Lewis and Furnham 1986, p. 78.
literature shows that the party in power when either of these 'miseries' increases loses support.

There is even indirect evidence that the public does not simply have a knee-jerk reaction to the 'misery index.' Chappell and Keech (1985) show that aggregate presidential popularity is better predicted by a set of economic indicators which take into account the possibility that a period of higher unemployment is 'needed' to reduce inflation inherited from the previous administration. The negative effect of unemployment or inflation on presidential popularity is reduced when the prior inflation level is entered into the prediction. This 'sophisticated voter' model implies that if we actually asked a voter why he or she supported the president in spite of a high unemployment level, we might be told that unemployment was the only way to reduce the inflation.

It is true that a bias toward 'individualistic' explanations of social problems rather than structural explanations is an important general psychological or ideological trait, with real consequences for both individual adaptation to problems and support of collective action. The problem is that some questions and modes of analysis are biased toward emphasizing either individualistic or collectivistic, structural responses, and do not allow respondents to reveal their notions of how individual and society interact. 'Free will' and 'structural determination' are not absolutes; free will is exercised within constraining structures—although it may sometimes combine in collective actions which, with great difficulty, change the structures. While some respondents (and social scientists) may focus only on one or the other, we need methods which allow people to reveal their sense of the interaction of the two.

METHODS OF STUDYING ÉLITE AND EXPERT CAUSAL THEORIES

In the real world 'élites' or leadership groups of various social institutions play an enormous role in formulating, disseminating, and acting upon theories of social phenomena. 'Experts,' 'intellectuals,' and 'lay theorists' (often referred to by the 'experts' as 'cranks') formulate theories of social problems and their solution (Hall 1989). These theorists along with professionals in mass communication and education transmit such ideas to other élites and to the public. The people running the major institutions of a society have to have some kinds of theories about their particular sector, and about society in general, to do their jobs, and these are likely to be more complex than those of the average citizen's.

Avoidance of crude categorizations of causes, and development of questions which bring out the 'causal models in people's heads', is clearly needed if we are studying élite responses to policy proposals. Élites typically are capable of
distinguishing between policies with the same broad goals, in terms of likely effectiveness, and of more cost to particular interests. Representatives of the same ‘economic class’ may be sharply divided based on theories of what works in the economy; this is often true of both business leaders and labor leaders (Barton 1974–75, 1984, 1985).

**Content Analysis of Élite Group Discussions**

A pioneering effort led by Axelrod (1976) developed ‘cognitive maps of political élites’ from content analysis of transcripts of discussions in decision-making bodies. The cognitive maps took the form of qualitative causal models—path diagrams showing causal relations among variables with positive or negative signs but without any numerical values. ‘Path operations’ allow the analyst to identify possibly conflicting consequences of variables for policy outcomes; locate cycles involving feedback from later variables to earlier ones; and assess how logical the participants policy recommendations were, given the causal assumptions.

Axelrod analyzed the transcript of a five-member group planning British Middle East policy in 1919. In the text of 20,000 words the coders found over 500 causal assertions, involving some 80 concepts; these could be mapped onto a causal model with a large number of linkages generally agreed on by the group. Each participant covered only part of the model in his contribution—one for instance spoke 1000 words, involving 31 variables and 40 causal beliefs. There appeared to be high consensus on the relationships of the variables; disagreements focused on the facts concerning the state of the variables. The idea of ‘cognitive maps’ was likewise applied to reports on the U.S. Constitutional Convention to chart Gouverneur Morris’s ideas about the Presidency (Ross 1976, pp. 96–112).

**Élite Surveys with Causal Questions**

An elaborate multi-stage survey of experts in the field of transportation policy was analyzed using the idea of cognitive maps (Roberts 1976). An initial questionnaire asked them ‘to list as many variables as they could think of that might be relevant to (constrain, influence, cause, be affected by, etc). the growing demand for energy in the transportation sector.’ Some 500 specific variables suggested were classified into seven categories, and the experts were asked on a second round to say whether there was a causal relation between each pair of these categorized variables and what its sign was—a ‘causal matrix’ question. The results showed disagreement on some links, and a path diagram was presented showing the relationships on which there was substantial agreement.
Of course in a larger sample one could treat the perceived relationship of each pair of variables as a dependent variable and try to account for differences in individual perceptions. Roberts suggests examining the effects of cultural differences, when respondents come from different countries, of role, when experts represent different institutions and professions, of background and personality, and of the 'issue domain'—whether it is more or less 'scientific' for instance. Changes in perceptions of causal relations over time could also be analyzed by longitudinal studies which would take into account effects of new information, of audience, of group structure and group processes. The concept of 'groupthink' in policy élites (Janis 1983) could thus be operationalized.

A sophisticated survey of élites' causal perceptions is Sabatier and Hunter's (1989) study of local élite groups' beliefs about land use and water quality at Lake Tahoe. About 100 government officials, 75 interest group leaders, and 20 other participants including scientists, journalists, and activists were surveyed, as to their general normative orientations (orientation toward market and property rights vs. governmental intervention, concern with preservation of natural areas) and their causal perceptions concerning four sources of pollution, as well as their specific reactions to three policy proposals. There was sharp disagreement on all of these variables within the sample.

Causal beliefs were related on the one hand to the interests each élite represented, and on the other hand to attitudes toward policy proposals and to various government bodies. The relations of beliefs to policy attitudes were significant even controlling for general normative orientations and the education of respondents. The researchers tested different assumptions about the time-order of the variables, and concluded that if the normative orientations of political élites were formed in their early years, the causal perceptions had only a 'relatively small—but still statistically significant' effect on policy attitudes. If the normative orientations were subject to adult socialization on the basis of experience, then the causal perceptions may contribute substantially to policy preferences (Sabatier and Hunter 1989, p. 254).

Sabatier and McLaughlin (1988) also sampled constituencies of some of the active participants and compared their attitudes toward 'economic growth and local control' vs. preservation of the natural environment. This showed that the élites tended to be more extreme than their constituencies. The constituency study apparently did not use the 'causal assumptions' questions; otherwise it would constitute a unique example comparing élites and publics with regard to causal assumptions as well as normative attitudes, and examining whether causal assumptions play the same role for the public as they do for élites. Sabatier (1988) has also developed a theoretical framework for analyzing 'policy-oriented learning' among élites, in which causal assumptions play an important role.

This study is a model of what might be done in examining élite causal
assumptions, normative orientations, and policy attitudes in other fields—for example economic or social policy.

THE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA EXPLANATIONS OF SOCIAL PHENOMENA

Content analysis can be used to illuminate the causal models being promoted by the mass media. This tells us about a major possible source of the causal theories held by the public (or about why they may not have much in the way of causal theories).

A study of 'Social problems in Estonian mass media 1975–1991' found that under communist rule the media preferred individualistic explanations of social problems (since in a perfect society individuals must be to blame if anything is wrong). After the democratization of Estonia an emphasis on political and structural causes was predominant (Lagerspetz 1993).

A British study analyzed attention to economic trends and explanations for them given in the three most popular daily newspapers from 1960 to 1980 (Mosley 1983). The press tended to be selective in reporting the facts of inflation or unemployment, but even more so in 'asserting the existence of particular relationships between economic variables.'

In the early 1960s the popular press offered the following consensus view of macroeconomic problems. Unemployment could be ended by means of a sufficient boost to aggregate demand; balance of payments deficits (or inflation, with which they were correlated) could be got rid of by means of a sufficiently large reduction in aggregate demand. . . By the early 1970s the mass electorate was being offered a very different view of how the economy worked. In 1970, 1971, and part of 1972 unemployment and inflation both rose simultaneously, and the response of all the tabloid newspapers was to present the reduction of inflation as a precondition for the reduction of unemployment. . . . The popular press, both on the left wing and on the right, jumped in about 1970 straight from . . . vulgar Keynesianism to vulgar Friedmanism (Mosley 1983, pp. 126–7).

Content analysis may also tell us what those who control the media believe, if we assume that they are not simply engaged in cynical manipulation of the public. Analysis of content of publications read mainly by different élite groups themselves may be a more reliable indicator of their causal beliefs, and may reveal rival theories struggling for élite acceptance. Students of the history of social science and economics have used journal contents to measure the rise and fall of 'scientific' theories of society and the economy (Patinkin 1983; Hall 1989).

CONCLUSIONS

1. Open-ended questions about the causes or remedies for social problems must be carefully probed to evoke as much of a 'causal model' as the respondent
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actually has in mind, without suggesting answers. We need to ask of each factor, ‘And what causes that?’ going back in the causal chain until it runs out or gets too far back into history. If we get back to ‘slavery’ as an early cause of some present racial inequality, we don’t need to pursue how slavery came about. We also need to probe forward: ‘And how does that cause poverty?’ or ‘how would that help reduce inflation?’ to clarify the mechanisms through which a factor works. Also we need to ask ‘Are there any other important causes?’ to see if the respondent has multiple factors in mind. In analysis the responses can be located in as elaborate an ‘accounting model’ as the respondent can produce, and the models of different categories of people compared.

2. The use of closed-ended questions and checklists should also be guided by accounting models. A model derived from a combination of exploratory interviews with the public and expert analyses of the problem could guide writing batteries of structured questions to get at the ‘causal matrix’ which the respondents have in mind. We can then look for the causes and consequences of specific causal beliefs. There is of course a problem with closed questions, of whether respondents have some ‘real opinion’ on these issues (Zaller and Feldman 1991) or whether they are producing pure guesses, which would not stand up in test–retest reliability checks, as was the case for many of the standard opinion items tested by Converse (1964, 1970) and Converse and Markus (1979).

Some combination of initial open-ended questions with careful non-directive probes to get answers as full as the respondent can readily give, and ‘checklist’ questions covering various ‘causal paths,’ considered important by experts, seems a plausible way of getting meaningful descriptions of the causal models in the minds of the public.

3. Dichotomous fixed-answer questions about causes, simplifying factor analyses of responses about causes, and dichotomous classifications of open responses, all have their uses in producing crude distinctions between ‘individualist’ and ‘social’ approaches to problems, but they obscure the distinctions within these broad ‘ideological’ camps. They equate all ‘social programs,’ and all ‘individual factors,’ blur the distinctions between types of social activism or social conservatism, and ignore the possibility that particular kinds of individual and social factors may be seen as interacting by the public.

4. There is a severe ambiguity built into many questions about the causes of the fate of individuals in society: some people respond in terms of what kind of people become unemployed or poor or criminal under given social and economic conditions, while others respond in terms of what determines the overall rates of unemployment or poverty or criminality. Judging by the gross differences in answers to differently worded questions on the same topic, and in responses given in different times and places, most people are aware of both
individual determinants of social status and behavior, and of social determinants of the numbers of individuals having those statuses and behaviors. One needs questions on both individual and social factors, on both 'who' has a problem and what determines how many have a problem to get a true picture of public explanations of social problems.

5. Efforts to relate specific causal beliefs to more general belief-systems or ideologies may require an approach going beyond a few open-ended questions, to long and repeated qualitative interviews or group discussions with respondents. Some examples of this kind of research are Robert Lane's (1962) study of Political Ideology among fifteen working-class residents of New Haven, Jonathan Rieder's (1985) Canarsie: the Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism, David Halle's (1984) study of America's Working Man, and William Gamson's (1992) Talking Politics. Lane's discussion of 'cabalism,' of blaming people or society, and of blaming 'error or evil,' Halle's discussion of the 'concept of the working man' as related to politics, unionism, and explanations of poverty, Rieder's descriptions of 'white ethnics' perceptions of minorities and crime, Gamson's discussion of the use of different knowledge resources in conversation, all show how intensive interviewing and arranged group discussion reveals complex structures of belief.

6. When interviewing professional experts—economists about the economy, social scientists and legal experts about crime, economists and social scientists about poverty and inequality—we need to develop means of revealing and analyzing their causal models of these problems. This requires the researcher to work closely with experts to learn the terminology and the modes of expression of causal linkages used by the experts. Significant differences in policy are implied by different coefficients on the paths between variables in causal models, or in the assumption or denial of contradictory effects through different paths. This brings the researcher outside the realm of 'lay epistemology' into the realm of scientific epistemology.

7. Content analysis of the mass media, coding the causal models directly expressed, or those implied by the media 'framing' of events, can provide information on the sources of public explanations of social problems. It may also offer information on the ideology of those who control the media. Analysis of publications of specific elite groups—including economists and social scientists—may offer an 'unobtrusive' way of studying the causal beliefs of these groups, and tracing the flow of causal ideas from one group to another over time.

REFERENCES


**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Allen H. Barton was director of the Bureau of Applied Social Research from 1962 to 1977 and a professor of sociology at Columbia University, New York. He is now Adjunct Professor of Sociology, University of Florida.