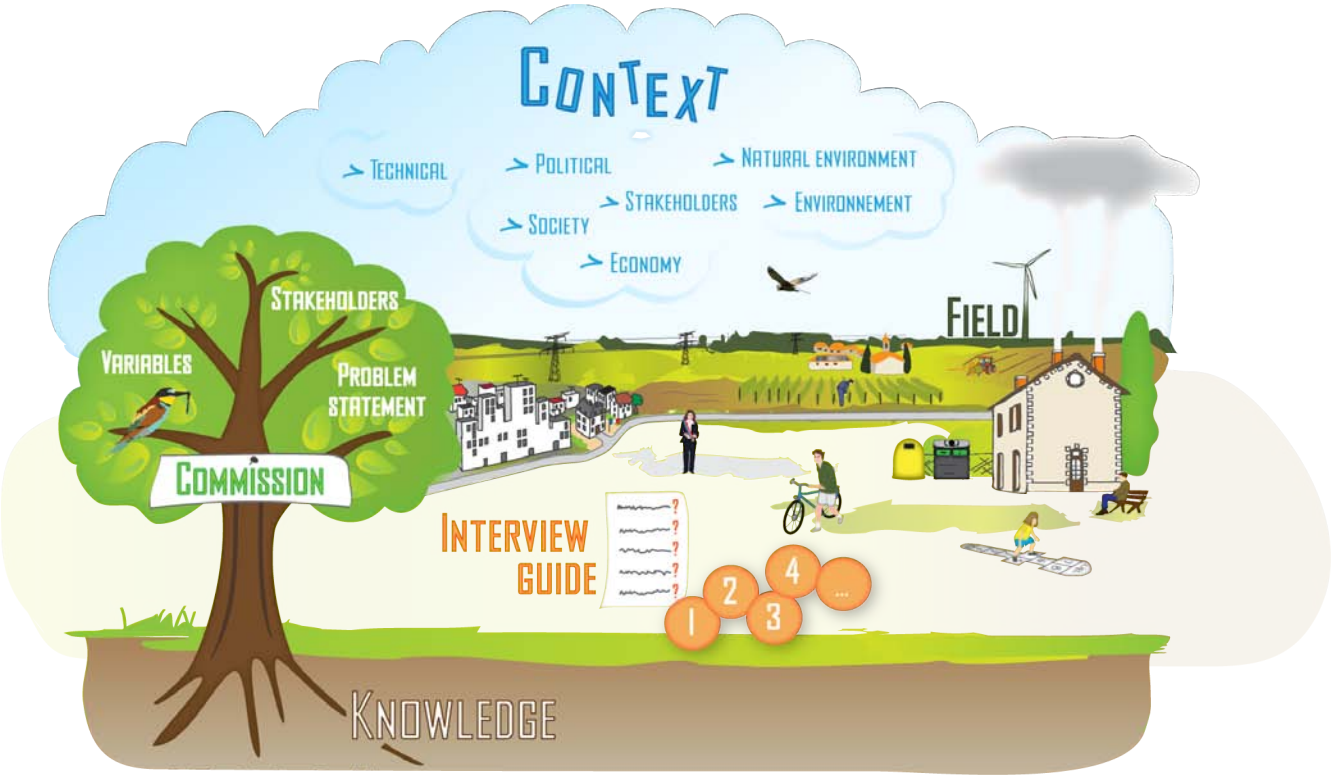
Constructing the problem statement: synthesis

Madeleine Mutel, Nicole Sibelet

The survey cycle is an inductive and constructivist process: there is a passing back and forth between theory and fieldwork.



PREAMBLE

The survey is one of several methods to collect information: literature reviews, direct observations, and experiments are the other methods that can be used in conjunction with a survey. The distinguishing feature of a survey is that it obtains information by systematically questioning people. It is appropriate for studies and research on attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, experience and knowledge, values and standards that are difficult to observe directly.

The notion, "survey", covers several information collection situations. All do not aim to produce scientific knowledge. In English, different terms are used to distinguish between the different types of surveys: the collection of administrative or legal information (*inquiry*), police investigations (*inquests*), *newspaper report*, *polls* or *surveys of public opinion*, and lastly, the

focus of this training, the sociological or statistical *survey*, which aims to build scientific knowledge.

A discussion space "Characterize sociological surveys aiming to produce scientific knowledge" (discussed in class or on a forum depending on the choice of the instructors).

More specifically, surveys using semi-structured interviews allow the person being interviewed to express their thoughts and are appropriate for studies seeking to understand how the interviewee:

- explains a situation,
- understands or perceives change,
- relates together facts,
- articulates his or her own models.

The inductive approach is favored in the construction of the problem statement on these topics, even if theoretical elements are used to analyze the commission and the questions of the problem statement in a conceptual manner.

Surveys using semi-structured interviews therefore usually combine:

- a hypothetico-deductive approach (making hypotheses, or more often, formulating "relevant" research questions with reference to a pre-existing theoretical framework,
- and an inductive approach (modification, construction of categories during the survey, reading raw data during processing and classing, or when seeking meaning). Using the data collected, forging new categories of analysis and concepts to which they apply allows data to be reclassified, groups to be reassembled, the modification of the pre-existing models used in the construction of the problem statement.

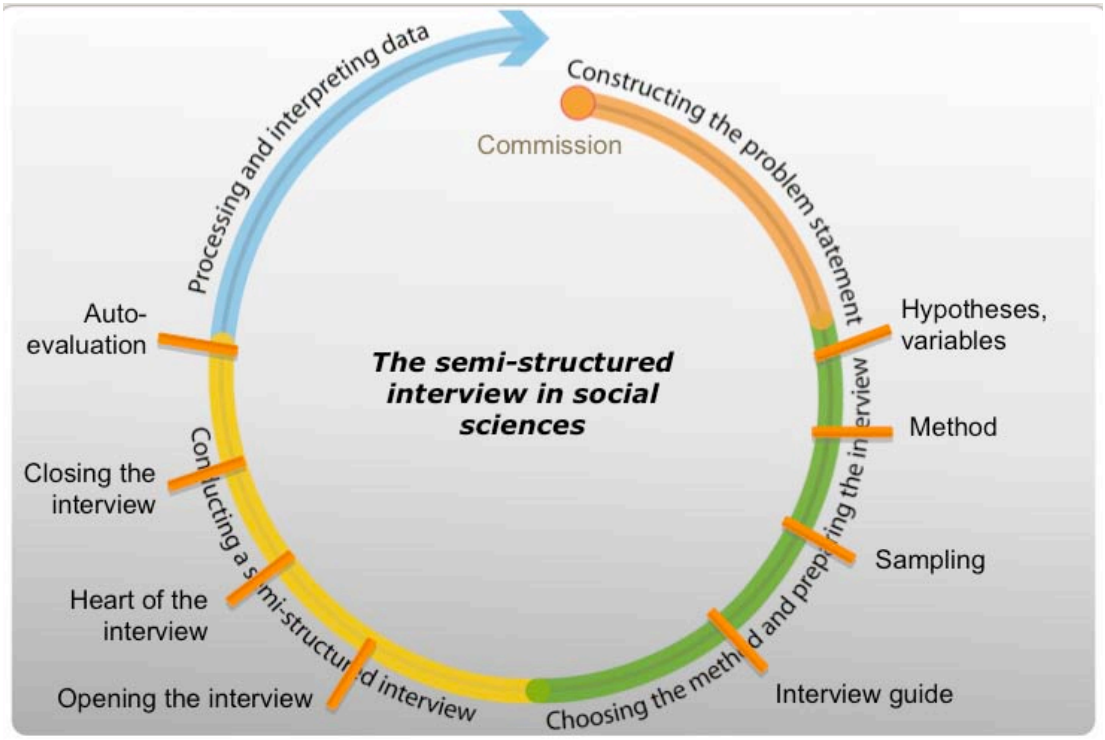
The semi-structured interview is thus a back and forth process between the elements taken into consideration during the construction of the problem statement and the theoretical elements that the researcher constructs based on his or her data.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

A difficulty of the semi-structured interview lies in the formulation of questions to ask people being surveyed to test a hypothesis: in effect, a mistake consists of asking interviewees their opinion about this hypothesis. A crucial step allows one to avoid this pitfall: **the construction of variables and indicators needed** to test each hypothesis of the problem statement. Another module in this training programme addresses this issue: "Select the survey method and prepare the semi-structured interview".

Another difficulty of surveys lies in the fact that the person being interviewed constructs his or her answer while saying it, and that this construction is produced in a situation of interaction between two people: the interviewer and the interviewee. The answer obtained may exaggerate, omit, hide, or modify elements. The quality of the answer depends on the quality of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Figure: The survey cycle



☞ This diagram will serve as a reference to locate where one is in the training modules.

Synthesis exercise "Problem statement and the scientific quality of a survey": you wish to assess the scientific quality of a survey or study? Follow the guide in the following exercise.