

# THE USE OF SCENARIOS IN SURVEY RESEARCH<sup>1</sup>

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Among the most difficult challenges facing researchers studying elderly persons residing in rural America is the determination of why people respond to their environment with a variety of attitudes and behaviors. Direct and forthright questioning of people may have a limited value in obtaining the desired information. In an attempt to understand motivating factors, psychologists and psychiatrists have developed new techniques which have the advantage of being subtle rather than direct. Among the many projective techniques designed to explore attitudes, emotions, needs, and values is the scenario or story. Advantages which are attributed to the scenario include its ability to eliminate: 1) the barrier of awareness, 2) the barrier of irrationality, 3) the barrier of inadmissibility, 4) the barrier of self incrimination and 5) the barrier of politeness (Oppenheim, 1966 and Widley, 1975). Disadvantages include: 1) time constraints, 2) money constraints, 3) scoring results, and 4) determination of validity. This

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<sup>1</sup>This study was directed by Dr. Paul Windley, Department of Architecture, Kansas State University, 1975. The study was supported by a grant through the Rural Development Act, Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

paper discusses the advantages and disadvantages of scenarios as an investigative vehicle in survey research.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to interview rural senior citizens in order to better understand their attitudes toward three environmental dispositions which influence their lives. These three dispositions were: 1) environmental manipulation, 2) safety and security, and 3) environmental style. Scenarios were used to compile information related to environmental expectations and environmental preferences.

A scenario as defined in this report consists of a word story which allows the elderly participant to project himself or herself into the story and to offer solutions to the problems posed in the hypothetical situation. The respondent is presented with a brief description of some events and characters, and at the end he or she is asked to state which course of action the character in the story should make and secondly how they, themselves would have reacted in the same situation.

## **Materials and Methods**

A sample of 90 people were randomly selected from a list prepared by the county assessor, in a

Kansas county which was identified by the 1970 U.S. census as 100 percent rural. The names were selected from those living in small towns of approximately 300 population. The sample represented senior citizens, age 65 and over of both sexes. Each participant was interviewed in his/her own home with the interview lasting from 20 to 60 minutes.

In order to obtain data of maximum reliability, both direct and indirect measures were used. Each interview was divided into four major parts: 1) demographic variables, 2) related topics, 3) scenarios, and 4) multiple-choice questions. An effort was made to create a format of overlapping questions as a check of the reliability of the responses.

Respondents were asked, "What should the individual in the scenario do" if living in a large city, on a farm, or in a small town and, "What would you do if you were the individual in the situation" and living in the same three environments? Of major interest were differences in prescribed behavior and perceived self behavior under the same circumstances.

The format for each of the six scenarios deal with environmental expectations and preferences. Two scenarios were designed to examine each of the three environmental dispositions.

Respondents were scored on a scale of high, medium or low for each of the three dispositions. Responses to each scenario were coded and scored by two individuals according to how strongly the response reflected the disposition under study. A person scoring high in the area of *safety and security* had a high tolerance of unsafe, insecure and non-territorial boundaries in environments. A high score in the area of *environmental manipulation* suggested that the respondent had a high desire or ability to manipulate the environment. A high score in the area of *environmental style* meant a high desire for age homogeneous environments, rather than environments including persons of all ages.

## Safety and Security

Safety and security pertains to active use of the environment to shield oneself from threat, and deals with such issues as locking doors, walking alone, camping, and driving.

Following are the two scenarios designed to examine the disposition of safety and security:

"Henry, 79, lives by himself. He has always been friendly and takes an interest in people. His trust in people leads him to not lock his doors when he is not home. Although he insists that no one would rob an old man, others are concerned about him and ask him to lock his doors."

"Hazel is 70 years old and is an avid outdoor enthusiast. She enjoys bird watching, long leisurely walks, picnics, and just about any outdoor activity. However, Hazel only goes out by herself insisting that she would rather take her time and experience nature alone. Many of her friends have cautioned her that if she would have an accident no one would be around to help her."

Regarding the first of these two scenarios, of the 90 persons interviewed, 92.1 percent recommended locking the doors in a large city, while 84.2 percent recommended locking the door in a small town. Their answers were brief and without hesitation. Advice readily given to Henry seemed to be based on accepted norms in our society. When they projected themselves into the large city situation, their answers indicated a belief that crime rates are higher in the large cities.

In the case of Hazel, all those interviewed expressed concern of her walking alone in a large city, especially at night. Many also expressed concern over her venturing out alone on the farm where she might not readily be found in case of an accident. Yet all agreed that it would be perfectly all right for Hazel to walk alone in a small town, as they did. These same people perceived a lack of

safety not only for Hazel in the city but also for themselves should they be in a large city.

The two scenarios on safety and security were designed to penetrate the barriers of *irrationality*, *inadmissibility*, and *awareness*. Our society places a high premium on sensible, rational, and logical behavior. Advice given to a character in a scenario is based on general feelings of how people should act in society. The majority of those interviewed seemed to apply such standards not only to Henry and Hazel but to themselves as well, thus breaking the *barrier of irrationality*, which is based on emotional and intuitive reasoning. The respondents in this study relied primarily on reasoning to provide answers.

In respect to the barrier of inadmissibility our society sets many norms and expectations for us all. People are in general expected to respond to cultural norms because of habit and acceptability. These scenarios provided an indirect means of testing the presence of stereotype attitudes such as: cities are unsafe; elderly should not wander out alone; senior citizens should be most cautious. Stereotypes related to "acting one's age" were shown in such questions and answers as "She's 70 you say?", "She shouldn't get out and walk at all.", "She had better stay home unless someone is with her." The two scenarios tended to prompt responses within the accepted cultural norms, perhaps due to habit and acceptability, and did not penetrate the barrier.

The *barrier of awareness* is the inability of an individual to respond openly due to lack of awareness of his/her own motives and attitudes. Rural people were aware of their bias against living in a large city as shown by such frequent responses as, "I would never live in a city," "The city's not safe," or "You don't know your neighbors in the city." These responses clearly penetrated the barrier of awareness since the respondents clearly stated reasons for their bias against living in a larger city.

### Environmental Manipulation

Environmental manipulation is the desire or

ability to manipulate the environment, and concerns such issues as home ownership, gardening, territoriality, transportation and privacy. Scenarios used to investigate the disposition of environmental manipulation were as follows:

"Ann is 68 and lives with her daughter and son-in-law. She has always been a meticulous housekeeper and enjoys cleaning house and rearranging the furniture once in awhile to keep things from getting stale. Her daughter resents this intrusion on what she feels to be her job."

"Mrs. Van Camp is 70 years old and last month lost her drivers license when she failed to pass the eye examination. Mrs. Van Camp's friends and neighbors have suggested that she sell her home and move to where her daily needs can be met close at hand."

Most of those interviewed seemed to place a high priority on independence. Comments such as, "Ann could find a small house nearby," "I'd never live with my children," and "If I did have to live with my daughter, I wouldn't interfere in her arrangements" were frequent the answers often involved from past personal experiences with parents or grandparents. These answers indicated that the subjects were not the least reluctant to reveal perceived situations and they readily provided reasons for their answers. Thus the scenario eliminated the *barrier of awareness*. The scenario also overcame the *barrier of inadmissibility* as shown by such responses and subsequent supporting logic as, "No home is big enough for two families," "Parents shouldn't live with their children," "If you have to live with your children, mind your own business." The respondents followed these statements with definite reasons for their responses.

The *barrier of politeness* is the tendency of individuals not to say negative, unpleasant or critical things but to use the "all right" facade.

These people did not hesitate to comment, "I love my children, but I wouldn't want to live with them."

In the second scenario involving environmental manipulation, Mrs. Van Camp was no longer able to drive because of failure to pass the eye examination. The intent was to determine to what degree the environment dictates the person's life style. Did the respondent's solution to the problem reflect an attitude of "man over environment" or "environment over man?" One elderly man stated, "Well, I guess she'll have to move to a rest home," while a lady said, "She can get her children to take her to the places she wants to go." The man's suggestion showed that he felt that Mrs. Van Camp should not let her environment place constraints upon her life style while that of the woman respondent showed a lower degree of manipulation of her environment. The first received a score of "high" and the second a "medium." As in the first scenario of this disposition, *the barriers of inadmissibility, awareness, and politeness* were penetrated.

#### Environmental Style

Environmental style deals with preference for age homogeneity as it might apply to choice of housing and general life style. Specific issues involved are congregate versus segregated housing—highrise apartments, nursing homes, single family dwellings, extended family arrangement.

"Jim 80 and Martha 82 live alone in their own home and have for several years since all their children have gone. Although they dearly love their home, maintenance and upkeep have become difficult because of their ages, and the children feel that they should move into one of those new highrise apartment houses for the elderly and live by people more their age."

"Mr. and Mrs. Brown live in their own home. Mr. Brown retired a few years ago and

now wants to sell their home and buy a trailer and travel around the country to see new places. However, Mrs. Brown has looked forward to the day when she could move closer to her sister who lives in a large community of retired people."

In the scenario involving Jim and Martha, the small town dwellers maintained a sense of adventure for the unknown and were willing as a whole to move to a highrise but unwilling to go to a nursing home with which they had had some experience through friends and relatives. All revealed that so long as they were able they wanted to stay right in the small town in their own homes but if a choice between highrise and nursing home had to be made, the highrise, with which they had had little or no experience, was preferred to the nursing home, with which they were familiar. On the other hand, in the Phillips (1975) report, an extension of this study which compared rural elderly and urban elderly, shows that the city dwellers prefer nursing homes over highrises, their experiences having been more directly related to highrises than to nursing homes.

Many felt that Mr. and Mrs. Brown in the latter scenario were too old to be pulling a trailer around, that it was unsafe both on the road and in strange parking accommodations. The rural elderly homeowner was conservative in reluctance to selling the family home. This attitude showed up in statements like, "They'll get tired of that and won't have a home to come back to," "If we look for greener pastures, we may lose what we already have," "Sooner or later one of them will die and then what?" These comments penetrate the *barriers of irrationality and inadmissibility* by stating norms that apply to "acting one's age" in a sensible and rational behavior.

The Brown scenario offers a conflict of interest which forced the elderly to choose sides. Some appeared willing to compromise with their spouses while others were too fearful of possible dangers to effect a workable compromise. However, both the men and women portrayed a

healthy respect for each other's opinions and rights. Yet this scenario appeared to perforate the *barrier of self-incrimination*, it is this barrier which involves behavior and feelings that might cause the individual to lower his or her self-esteem—the traditional “embarrassing moment.” An example of this was the woman who said, “If I had it to do over again, I'd go with him (deceased husband) anyplace.”

People at times were reluctant to reveal likes and dislikes within themselves which they felt were not acceptable to national norms. For example, one woman stated, “There are all types of people in a city. I wouldn't want to live there.” This is a very vague response and did not reflect her true feelings which were covered up by politeness. Thus, at times the *barrier of politeness* was not broken. In many cases similar to the one mentioned, the projective technique did not probe deeply behind the individual's social facade.

#### **Evaluation of the Scenario Technique**

A fringe benefit of the scenarios used in this study was that they helped gain participants' interest. The problem solving was essentially looked upon by the participant as a game in which they were interested and constructive players, the “Dear Abby”. Scenarios proved to be a logical method of breaking the ice in initiating discussion of various topics with senior citizens and assured a friendly low-keyed, but constructive atmosphere.

To prepare and execute successful scenarios to a designated populous, one must have previously obtained certain demographic information about the life styles of the persons to be surveyed. This facilitates the development of scenarios which cover scenes familiar to the interviewee. They must be subtle, indirect and not offensive.

By first presenting a problem for a hypothetical person and having the respondent suggest a solution, the scenario, allows the subject to project his or her ideas about society's norms and expectations. When the participant is projected into the hypothetical situation he will occasionally cast

aside accepted society norms and confidentially express what he does personally under similar circumstances. This allows measurement of differences in recommendations and actual personal compliance. In this study response changes were recorded but were found to be not statistically significant.

Care was taken on the part of the interviewer to concentrate on presenting the scenario, and at the same time keeping eye-contact with the participant while also observing his/her overall reaction. Eye contact allowed the interviewer to encourage and assist the participant when hesitant in response. These multiple demands hindered note taking. Therefore, a tape recording was necessary when agreeable to the interviewee.

#### **Conclusions and Implications for Design**

##### **In relation to the environmental domains:**

1) *Safety and security* are very important to the elderly and emphasis in design is needed on safety with well lighted surroundings, adequate locking devices and a means of seeking assistance promptly when needed.

2) *Environmental manipulation*: Rural elderly regardless of sex place a high priority on independence and home ownership. Planning for them must include provisions for maximum individualism and privacy. They will not adapt to a new life style until circumstances impose restraints making the change necessary. These persons may require education to bring about acceptance of transportation other than walking or personally driving a car.

3) *Environmental style*: These individuals have lived their entire lives in a heterogenous society and the majority reject the idea of a homogenous society. They must be able to retain their contacts with persons of all ages and look forward to having friends of all ages. They reject the old folks home concept.

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