

Researching Contemporary Cosmologies: Questionnaires and the Invisible



Sir Alister Hardy

Overview

- What is a questionnaire?
- Why use questionnaires?
- Formulating questions.
- Surveying the Invisible.
 - *The Census of Hallucinations* (1889).
 - The Alister Hardy Question (1969).
 - The Fairy Census (2016).
- The data.
- Problems and Considerations.
- Conclusion.

What is a Questionnaire?

- Jenny Rowley (2014):
- “...we use the term research questionnaire to refer to questionnaires that are used as part of an academic research project...documents that include a series of open and closed questions to which the respondent is invited to provide answers.”
- “Research questionnaires may be distributed to the potential respondents by post, e-mail, as an online questionnaire, or face-to-face by hand.”
- “Interviews, especially structured and semi-structured interviews, also ask questions that the respondent is invited to answer, but the essential distinguishing characteristic of questionnaires is that they are normally designed to be completed without any direct interaction with the researcher, either in person or remotely” (Rowley, 2014, p. 308).



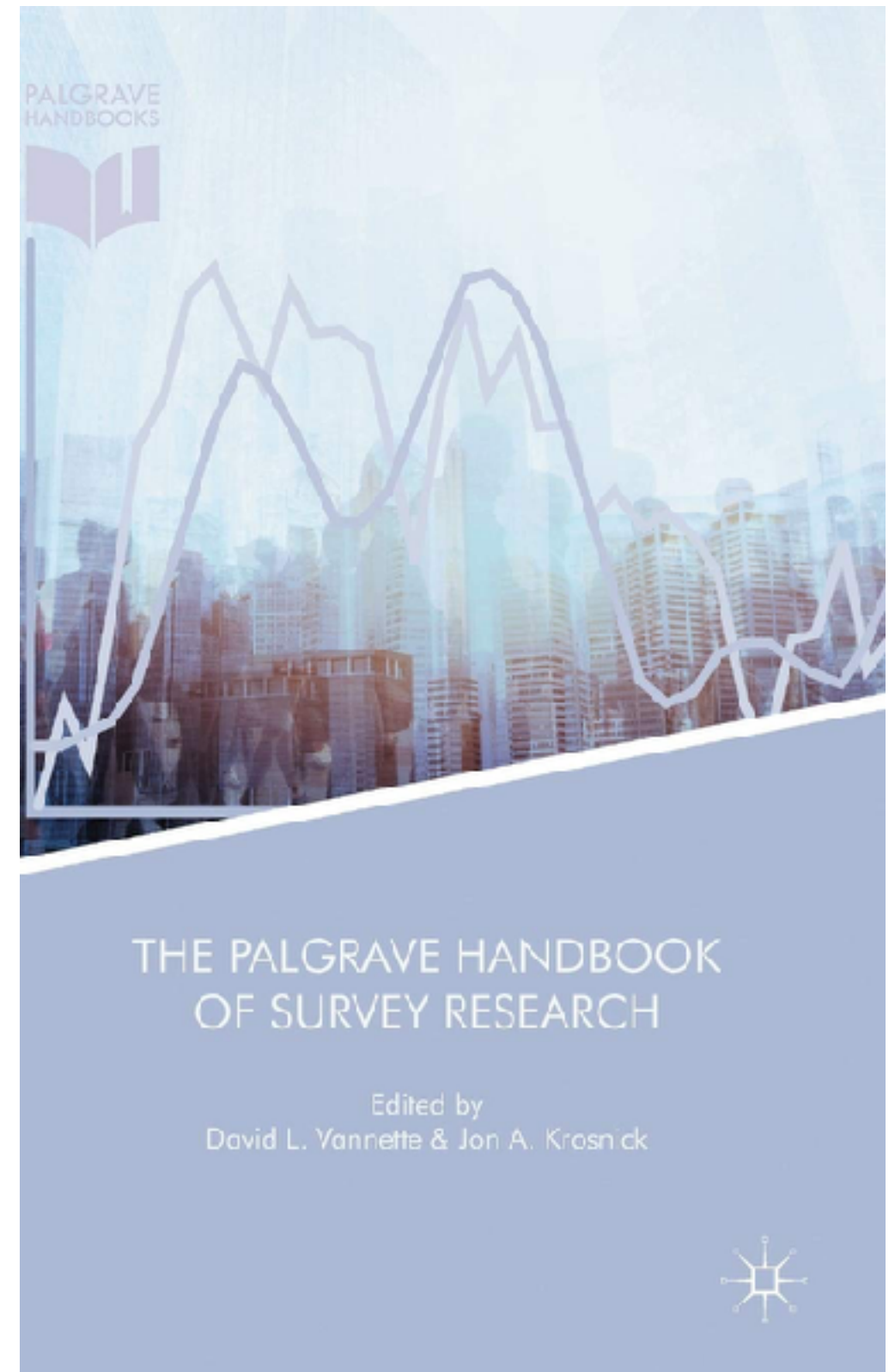
Why Use Questionnaires?

- Can collect a range of different types of information, e.g. facts, attitudes, behaviours, experiences, etc.
- Can reach a large number of people with relative ease, especially making use of online questionnaires.
- Rowley suggests that questionnaires are especially practical when:
 1. “The research objectives centre on surveying and profiling a situation, to develop overall patterns.
 2. Sufficient is already known about the situation under study that it is possible to formulate meaningful questions to include in the questionnaire.
 3. Willing respondents can be identified, who are in a position to provide meaningful data about a topic. Questionnaires should not only suit the research and the researcher, but also the respondents” (Rowley, 2014, p. 310).



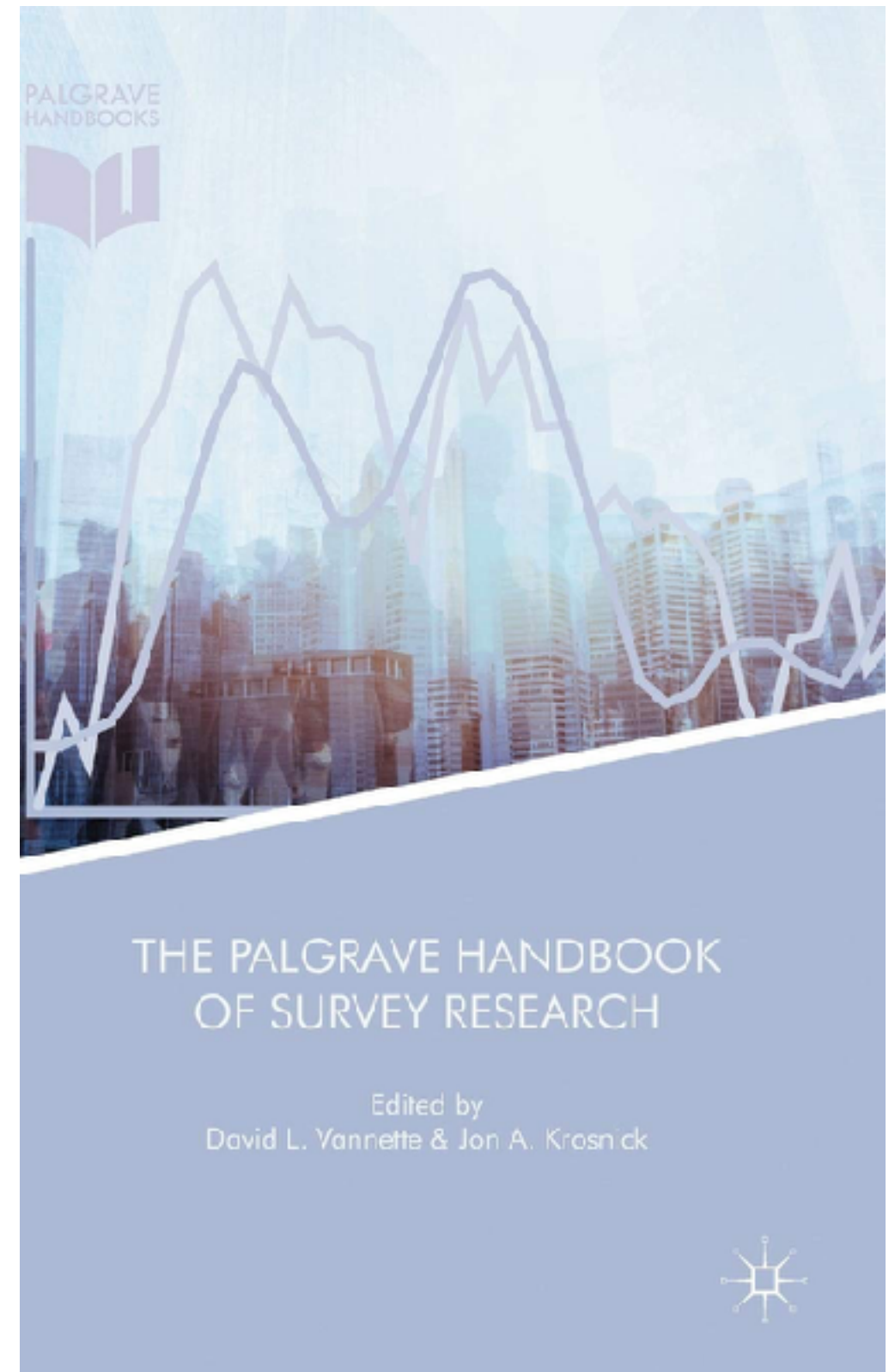
Formulating Questions

- The questions you ask in your questionnaire will help you to answer your research question.
- Krosnick & Presser (2018) provide a useful survey of ‘conventional wisdom’ in putting together questionnaire questions:
 - “1. Use simple, familiar words (avoid technical terms, jargon, and slang);
 - 2. Use simple syntax;
 - 3. Avoid words with ambiguous meanings, i.e., aim for wording that all respondents will interpret in the same way;
 - 4. Strive for wording that is specific and concrete (as opposed to general and abstract);
 - 5. Make response options exhaustive and mutually exclusive;
 - 6. Avoid leading or loaded questions that push respondents toward an answer;
 - 7. Ask about one thing at a time (avoid double-barreled questions); and
 - 8. Avoid questions with single or double negations” (Krosnick & Presser, 2018, p. 264).
- Depending of your research question, your questions might be explicit or more subtle, e.g. if investigating a relationship between two variable:
 - “...the questionnaire may ask about [the variables], separately, thereby collecting data that can be analysed to investigate the relationship” (Rowley, 2014, p. 312).



Open and Closed Questions

- Closed questions - e.g. tick boxes, yes/no questions, scales etc.
- Open questions - e.g. that leave space for the respondent to give a narrative or descriptive account.
- "Although the vast majority of survey questions are closed, some open questions play prominent roles in survey research..." (Krosnick & Presser, 2018, p. 265).
- They can be combined, e.g. with the the 'other' option in survey questions.
- "Open questions can add richness to survey results that is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve with closed questions, so including some (on their own or as follow-ups to closed items) can yield significant benefit" (Krosnick & Presser, 2018, p. 268).



Replicating Questions

- Replication:

“Research that is informed by previous theory and research is described as deductive. With deductive research, theory is a significant factor in determining the research questions, and indeed, it may be possible and even advisable to use part or all of a previous questionnaire from a published article on a similar topic” (Rowley, 2014, p. 312).

- As long as you reference correctly and give an appropriate rationale, you can repeat pre-existing questions. This allows for a comparison between responses and studies.



Structuring the Questionnaire

- Krosnick & Presser give useful common sense advice on structuring questionnaires:
- “1. Early questions should be easy and pleasant to answer, and should build rapport between the respondent and the researcher.

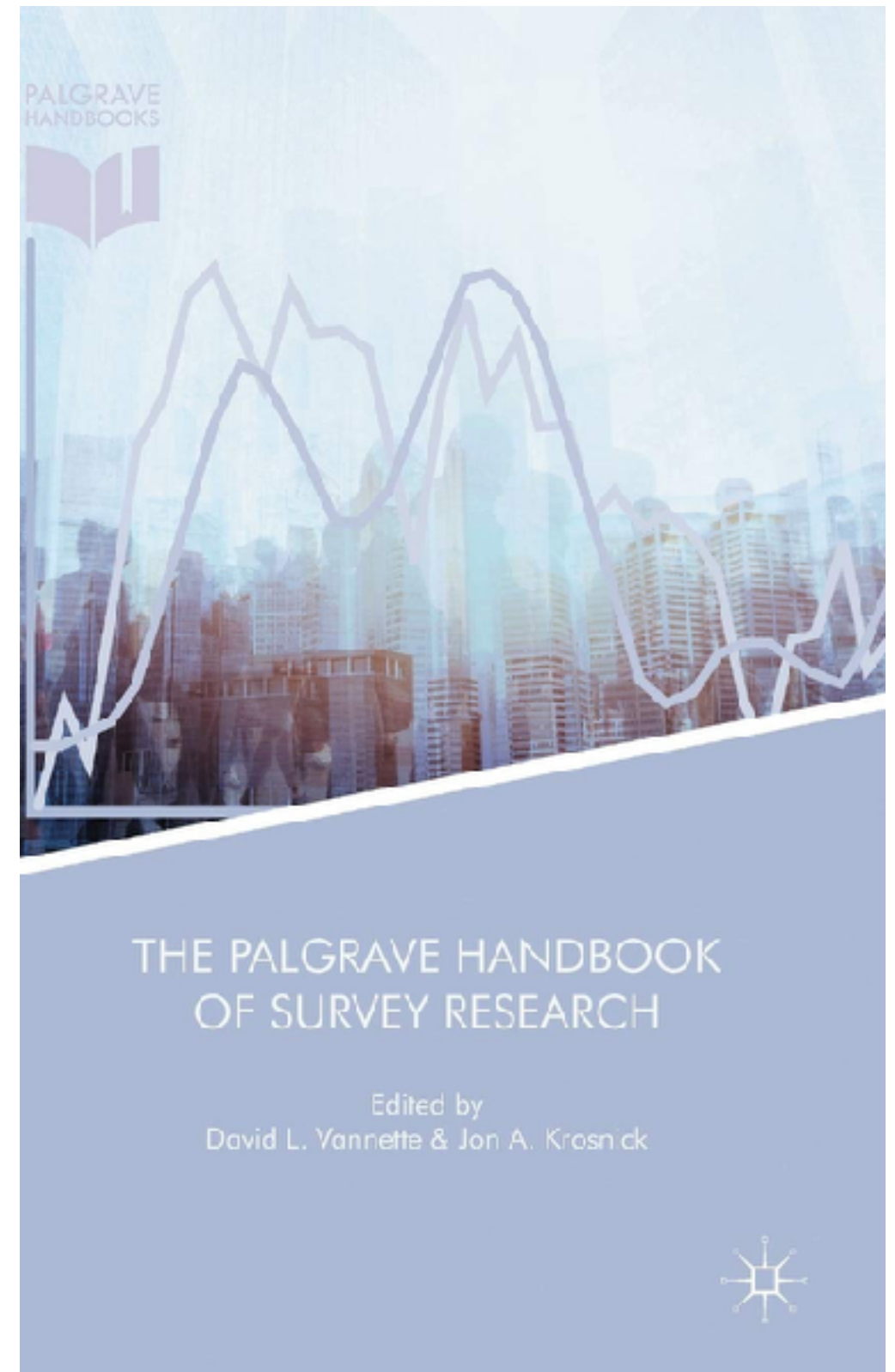
2. Questions at the very beginning of a questionnaire should explicitly address the topic of the survey, as it was described to the respondent prior to the interview.

3. Questions on the same topic should be grouped together.

4. Questions on the same topic should proceed from general to specific.

5. Questions on sensitive topics that might make respondents uncomfortable should be placed at the end of the questionnaire.

6. Filter questions should be included, to avoid asking respondents questions that do not apply to them” (Krosnick & Presser, 2018, p. 264).



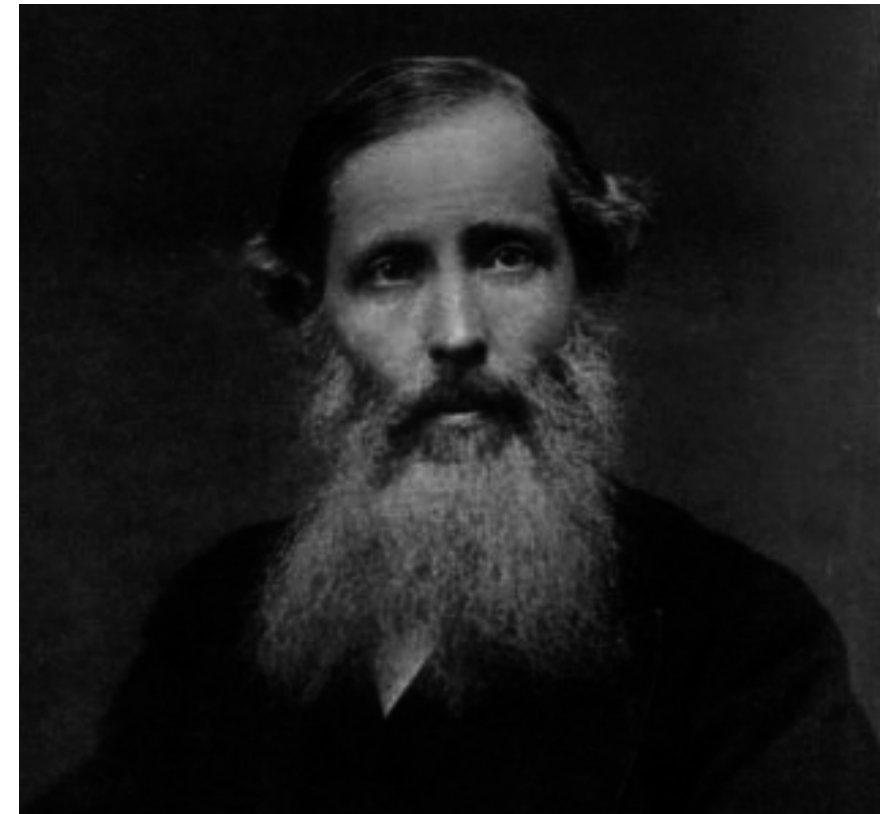
Surveys of the Invisible

- *Census of Hallucinations* (1889):

“Have you ever, when believing yourself to be completely awake, had a vivid impression of seeing or being touched by a living being or inanimate object, or of hearing a voice; which impression, so far as you could discover, was not due to any external physical cause?”

- The Alister Hardy Question (1979):

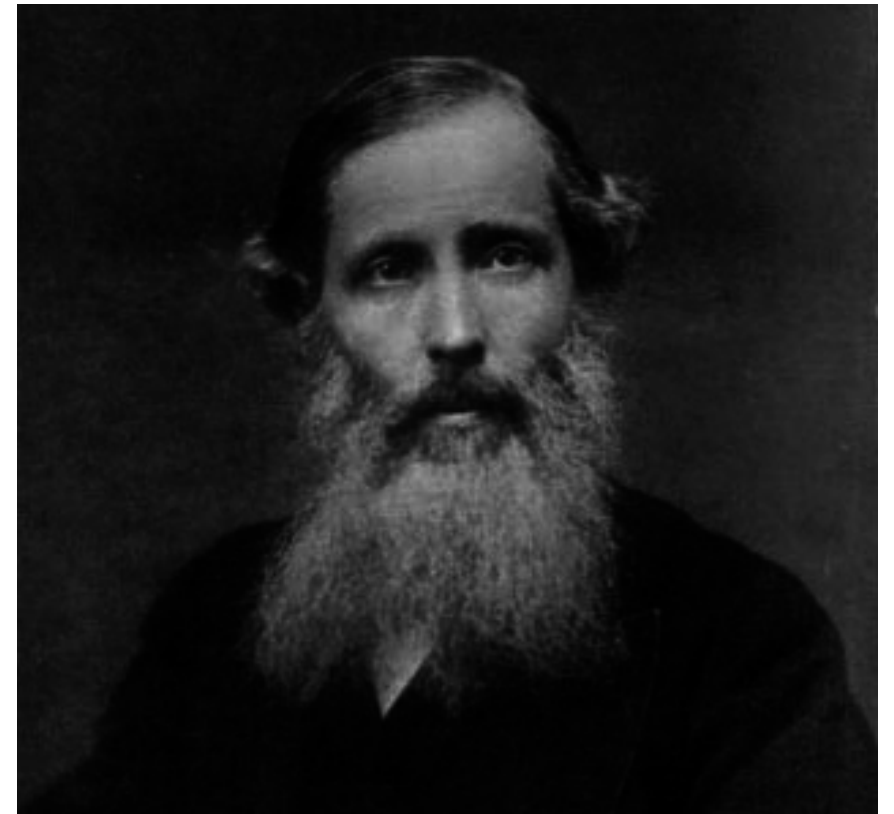
“Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?”



Data

- In response to the Hardy Question:

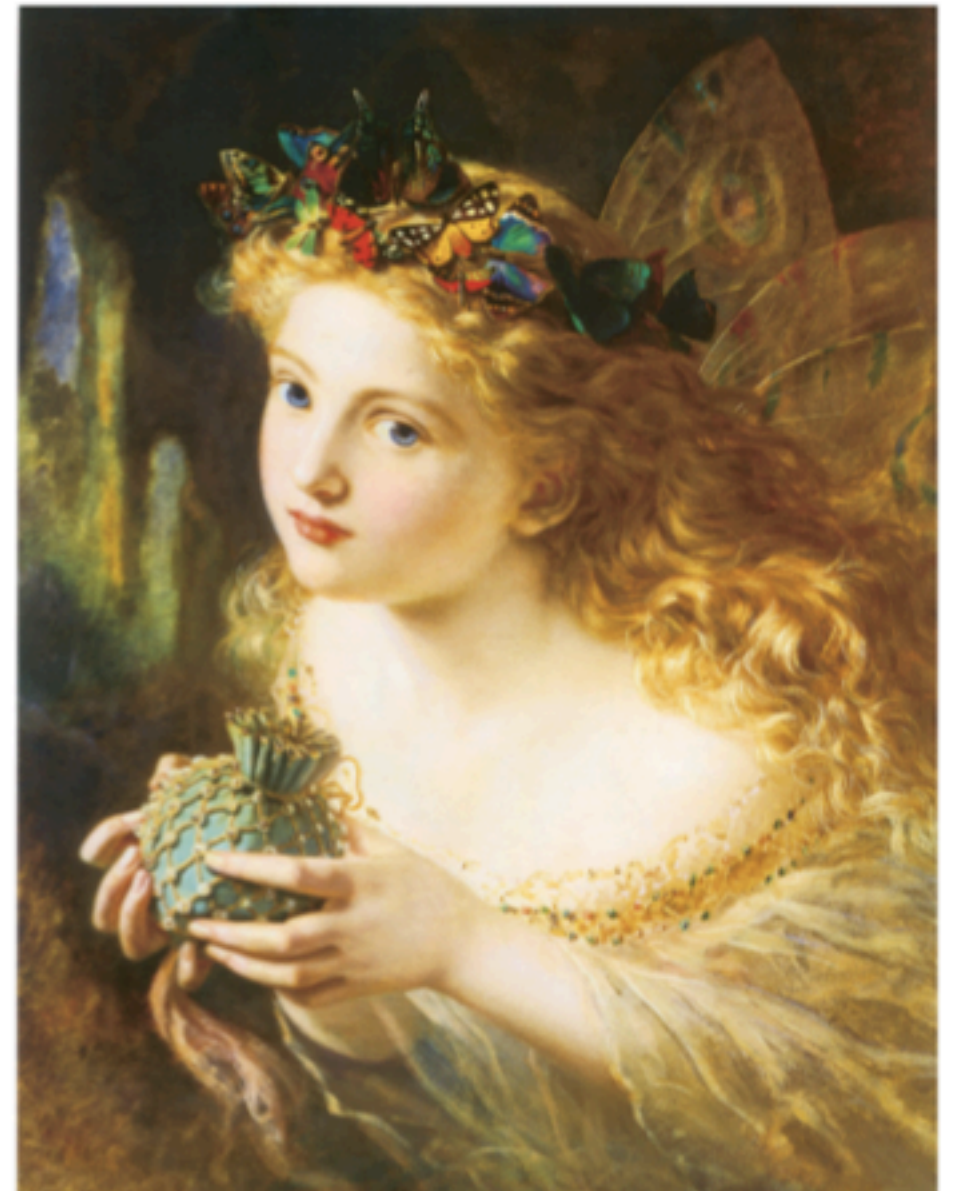
Male 60: “There was no sensible vision, but the room was filled by a Presence which in some strange way was both about me and within me. I was overwhelmingly possessed by Someone who was not myself, and yet I felt I was more myself than I had ever been before...” (cited in Beardsworth, 1977, p. 122).



The Fairy Census

- Gender, Nationality/Ethnicity, Age, Age at time of experience, Where did it take place?, What time?, Were you alone?, Light conditions?....
- “Please describe your fairy experience in as much detail as possible.”
- What sex were the fairies? How big were they? Did they try to communicate? How? What senses were involved? What was their character?...
- Spiritual/Religious tradition? Level of education, How often do you have experiences? Opinion of fairies, etc...

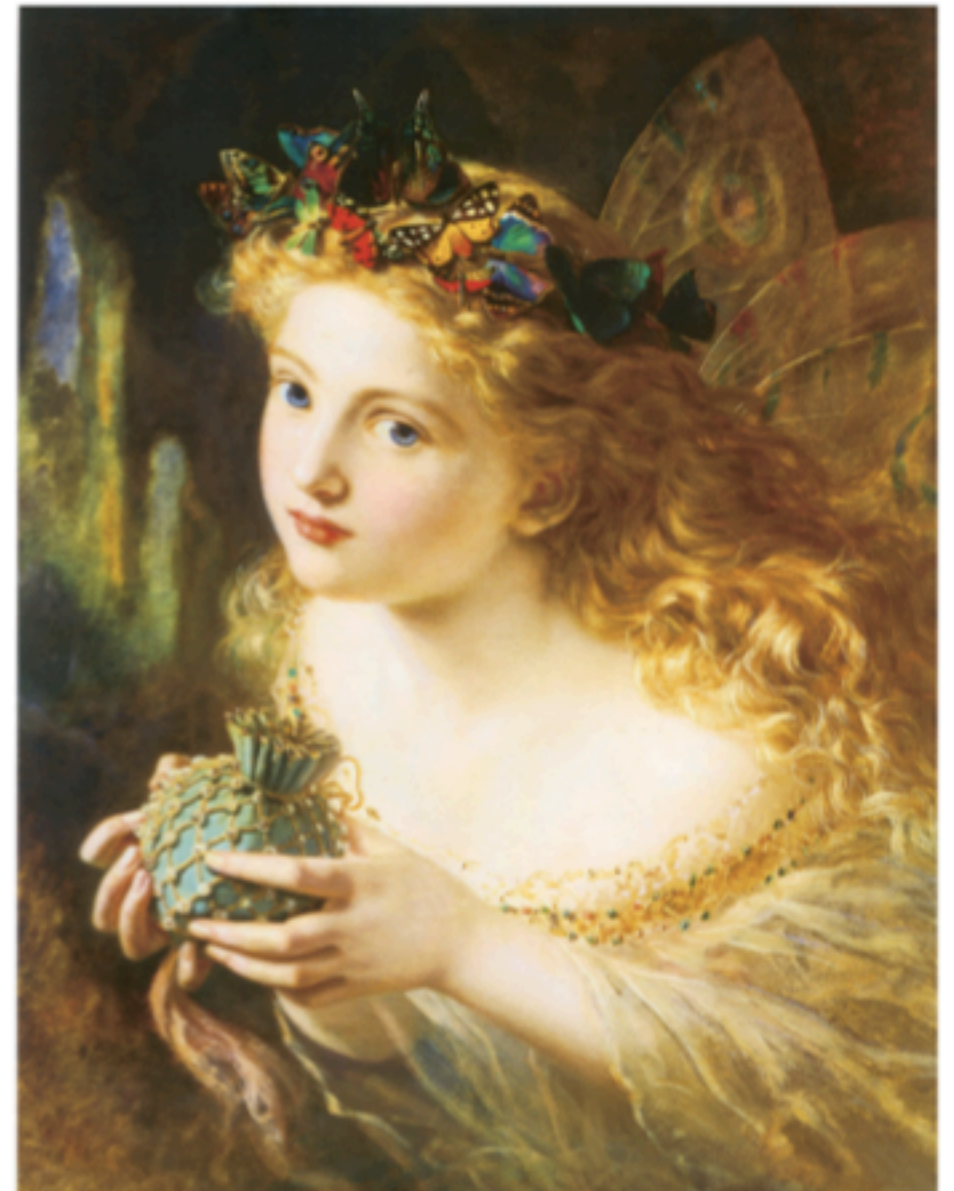
**FAIRY
CENSUS**
2014-2017



Data

- §113A) England (Shropshire). Female (third person); still in touch with the witness; family; 1990s; 21-30; on a country road; alone; 12 pm-3 pm; less than a minute; no fairy mood given; never or almost never has supernatural experiences; no special state reported. 'My wife was driving down a country 'A' road near *** in Shropshire and saw a very short man, about three-feet high, pushing a little cart or wheel barrow along the grassy verge by the side of the road. There were no houses or driveways nearby, and no other cars on the road. It was the middle of the day in summer time. He was dressed in a light/mid green two or three piece suit and wore a green hat. She was so surprised as she drove past (at about fifty miles per hour) that she looked in the rear view mirror but the man had gone, without any apparent place for him to have hidden.' 'Three-feet tall old man, wearing a green suit, pushing a little cart.'

FAIRY CENSUS 2014-2017

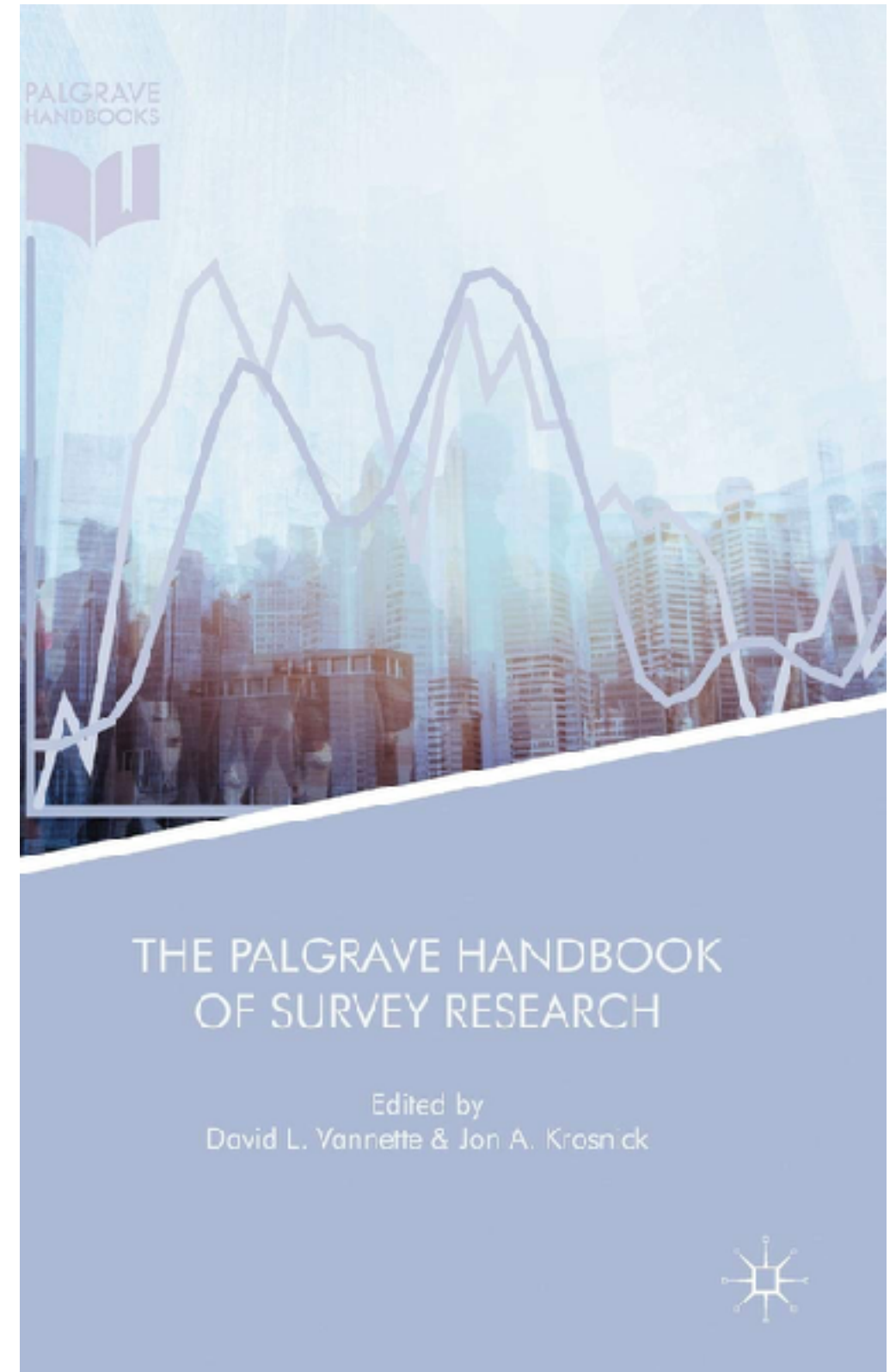


Analysing the Data

- “In order to analyze the answers to open questions, they must be grouped into a relatively small number of categories. This requires the development of a coding scheme... (Krosnick & Presser, 2018, p. 266).
- e.g. in his analysis of the first 1,000 account in the RERC archive Timothy Beardsworth writes:

The episodes I shall quote involve “sensory” phenomena - visions, voices, and the like. I classify the phenomena under separate [headings] according to the “sense” involved: (1) visual, (2) auditory, (3) tactile, (4) inward sensations. There is also (5) the sense of a “presence”, the feeling that someone is there, based on no sensory evidence at all. This feeling, I think, so far as being out on a limb, somehow underlies the other “sensory” categories (Beardsworth, 1977, p. ix).

- “The costs of these procedures, coupled with both the difficulties interviewers confront in recording open answers and the longer interview time taken by open questions, are responsible for the widespread use of closed questions” (Krosnick & Presser, 2018, p. 266).



Problems

- Questionnaires are not without their problems - they are inherently limited.
- Galasiński & Kozłowska (2010) argue that:

“...the process of filling in a questionnaire results in the experiences that the instrument is designed to examine being made irrelevant and their complexity far too great for a-contextual quantification.”



Not ‘experiencing’...

- What is the data that we are collecting? Beliefs, experiences, stories, re-constructions, simplifications? It is not experience itself.
- David Yamane argues that:

“...from a practical, methodological standpoint, we can only study the after-the-fact interpretations that people construct and convey to understand the meaning of their experiences - how they turn experiencing into an experience” (Yamane, 2000, p. 176).



Not 'experiencing'...

- Yamane goes on to give some critiques of the approaches employed by researchers of religious experience:
- "...they are often purely descriptive: merely coding responses into different "types" or "classes" of religious experience....
- "These approaches see people's descriptions of religious experiences simply as realistic representations, not as interpretations or retrospective accounts which seek to render the experiences meaningful and which therefore change over time with the experiencer's life circumstances, or with the social context of the telling..."
- "...by using a closed-ended question as a filter to select those who will be interviewed about their experiences, these qualitative researchers run the risk of filtering out those who do not understand their experiences in the terms given by the researcher" (Yamane, 2000, p. 180).



Summary

- Questionnaires are good for collecting lots of data, from lots of people in a relatively short amount of time.
- Conducted remotely.
- Enables the collection of both quantitative (closed questions) and qualitative data (open questions).
- Questions should be easy to understand for the respondent.
- Replication of questions from previous research is ok, and actually can be very useful for comparison, as long as referencing guidelines are adhered to.
- But, filling in questionnaires is ultimately a reductive exercise.
- Responses to questionnaires are not the experience itself, but a narrative re-construction of the experience made to fit into a particular box.
- We should allow as much room for questionnaire respondents to give open answers.
- Even this, though, is limited - in-depth interviews can help to overcome these limitations.

References

- Beardsworth, T. (1977). *A Sense of Presence: The phenomenology of certain kinds of visionary and ecstatic experience, based on a thousand contemporary first-hand accounts*. Oxford: The Religious Experience Research Unit.
- Galasiński, D. & Kozłowska, O. (2010). 'Lived Experience: Strategies of Coping With the Quantitative Frame.' *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 271-284.
- Hardy, A. (1979). *The spiritual nature of man: A study of contemporary religious experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I. & Bailey, A. (2020). *Qualitative Research Methods*. London: Sage.
- Krosnick J.A. & Presser, S. (2018). 'Questionnaire Design.' In: D. Vannette & J.A. Krosnick (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Survey Research*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 439-455.
- Rowley, J. (2014). 'Designing and Using Research Questionnaires.'
- Sidgwick, H. *et al.* (1889). *The Census of Hallucinations*.
- Yamane, D. (2000). 'Narrative and Religious Experience.' *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 61, No. 2, pp. 171-189.
- Young, S. (2016). *The Fairy Census, 2014-2017*. Available Online: <http://www.fairyist.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/The-Fairy-Census-2014-2017-1.pdf> [Accessed 17/02/2021].