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The Cannell Legacy
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- Director of Columbus, Ohio Counseling Service
- Field Director, Department of Program Surveys, WW II
- Field Director, Survey Research Center, Michigan
- Director, Program in Interview Methodology, SRC
The Legacy: An Integrated Collection of Survey Measurement Tools

- Empirical documentation of response error
- Model of the response process
- Theory of the interview
- Set of complementary interviewing techniques
- Interview Observation
Documenting response error

- Collaboration with the U.S. Public Health Service in early 1960s
- Record check studies of doctor visit and hospitalization reporting
- Show relationships between elapsed time, salience, social desirability and under-reporting of health events
- Findings converge with allied projects sponsored by USPHS
- Findings parallel those of similar projects in other fields
Model of the response process

- Heuristic diagram showing steps in response process
- Progenitor of other conceptualizations
- Shows ways in which respondent can produce accurate or inaccurate responses
- The ‘inaccurate’ path foreshadows ‘satisficing’
1. R's comprehension of question

2. R's cognitive processing:
   a. Assessments and decisions concerning information needed for accurate answer
   b. Retrieval of cognitions (attitudes, beliefs, experiences, facts)
   c. Organization of retrieved cognitions and formulation of response on this basis

3. R's evaluation of response (2c) in terms of its accuracy

4. R's evaluation of response in terms of R's other goals

5. R gives response judged accurate based on adequate processing

6. R's choice or modification of response based on cues from:
   a. Interviewer (status, appearance, behavior)
   b. The question and preceding questions
   c. R's own beliefs, values, attitudes, goals

7. R gives inaccurate or incomplete response characterized by:
   a. Conformity bias
   b. Desirability bias
   c. Acquiescence bias
   d. Other inadequacies
Theory of the interview

• How do I stay on the straight path to an accurate response?
• Questions need to be designed for ready comprehension
• Interviewers need to communicate questions accurately
• Other communication in the interview needs to be aimed at increasing accurate reporting
• Apart from administering questions, interviewing involves giving help to respondents on how to answer them
• What does the question require? How should I go about answering? How hard should I work? How do I know if I accomplished the task?
Taming interview meta-communication

- Any communication other than question-asking needs to be scripted in service of accurate reporting
- Commitment – this is your promise to approach the interview with care and diligence
- Instructions – this is how you approach the interview tasks, in general and with respect to particular questions
- Feedback – this is how you know if you followed the instructions
- Respondents more likely to stay on path to accurate response if interviewers give tips on how to do so.
Interview observation

- Views about communication in the interview were shaped by research on interview interaction
- First focus on interviewer evaluation
  - Detailed examination of behavior of both the interviewer and respondent
  - Control interviewer behavior that does not promote response accuracy
- Later, a question evaluation tool
  - Look at initial question asking and adequacy of response
  - “Inadequate” answers signal problems with the question
  - Uses: pretesting, diagnosis of data quality issues
Research on technique effects

• A variety of studies – small, homogeneous samples and large national samples, surveys focused on different topics
• Instructions, feedback and commitment have shown promise in reducing response error
• Response error often operationalized as under-reporting, but studies have also shown reduced over-reporting of socially desirable behavior and more reporting of undesirable behavior and attitudes
• Could be useful in promoting measurement reliability as well as reducing bias
Looking forward

• More research inspired by the Cannell perspective is needed
• Research may document effectiveness of the approach in new contexts or specify conditions in which they are more or less successful
• The approach is perhaps more relevant in era when survey participation is under threat
• The approach may work as well or better in surveys employing newer technologies as it has in traditional surveys
Charles Cannell Fund in Survey Methodology:
Application Deadline March 29, 2019

- Develop social psychological theories
- Test hypotheses and techniques derived from these theories
- Develop techniques for measuring and improving the interaction between the respondent and the interviewer
- Dissertation research
- Small experimental studies
- Graduate students, early career researchers, or visiting scholars

More information is available at: