Exploring the Mind of the Interviewer: Findings from Research with Interviewers to Improve the Survey Process
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Background

The interviewers’ (l) task in the data collection process is a complex one, with many judgments and decisions being made from moment to moment as they ask questions to get answers from respondents (Rs). (Japic, 2008; Ongena & Dijkstra, 2007).

To go through this type of process in real-time during the survey interview:

Methodology

We conducted 27 semi-structured cognitive interviews lasting 60 minutes.

Participants were Federal interviewers with 1-15 years of experience across multiple surveys (e.g., employment, health, housing, crime, spending).

Grounded theory approach to identify themes in behavior across a variety of survey questions and contexts.

Results were analyzed to develop a framework for training and future research.

Select quotes from are representative of a general response format or category in the data.

Research Questions

Sensitive Questions for Rs:

- Topic: income, children, disability/health, taxes, demographics

The income question is the most sensitive. [Rs will ask] “Do I have to tell you it’s none of your business, I don’t want to tell you.”

I strategies for sensitive questions:

- Distancing: “I show respondents the [CAPI] screen.”
  - “I’m required to ask all questions.”

- Alter response options: “I don’t need to ask an amount, just give me a category.”

- Emphasis/confidentiality: “Data are confidential and represent many other households.”
  - “There is a fine of $250,000 for breaking confidentiality.”

- Display of Rs: “I understand you might be uncomfortable.”

- Apologizing: “I’m sorry I have to ask these questions.”

Sensitive Questions for Rs:

- Context plays a role in what makes questions sensitive to ask: “Aking about sexual orientation and gender identity was recently added to the survey. This is sensitive when asking people from other cultures or countries, or they have religious memorabilia in the house.”

- Asking about biological/adopted/step children when maybe the kids are within earshot. Kids may not know they are adopted, stepchildren may be considered their own.

Methodology

Difficult Questions for Rs:

- Topic: Detailed household expenses, healthcare insurance, stocks, Medicare, medical payments, estimating rent without utilities.

- It’s not worth the deductible, they might just know they spent $50 at the doctor’s office.

- Rs don’t know the amount of their Social Security that gets deducted for Medicare. [I have to] explain this question to the R.

I strategies for difficult questions:

- Accept response: “I’m not always sure what [medical] expenses cost or go into what category. Sometimes I am afraid to probe in case I get it wrong.”
  - “Probing isn’t always worth it. You might not get more detail but it is a big ask.”

- Improve recall: “I will probe about when they get paid. [Ask them] what is your paycheck amount?”
  - “I try to probe about seasons, this helps Rs recall.”

- Encourage estimation: “I really understand the questions but memory is a bigger issue. I ask for best estimates rather than precise answers.”

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Results, continued

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- Sensitive vignette
  - “Are you currently doing any work for pay?”
  - “I’m not looking forward to these questions since I lost my job.”

- Neutral vignette
  - “Are you currently doing any work for pay?”
  - “Since I just graduated from college with my degree, I’m still looking for a job at the moment.”

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Vignettes

- We used vignettes to get feedback on situations that depicted realistic survey interactions about employment and program participation.

- Vignettes were a mix of neutral, sensitive, and difficult survey questions and contexts.

- Is rated each vignette for sensitivity or difficulty.

- Example from Survey Vignettes on Employment:

- Sensitive vignette
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Future Research:

- Use CARI recordings to investigate question asking in the survey process.

- Research effectiveness of adding scripted probes into surveys.

- Use vignettes to gain insight into Rs decision-making processes.

- Predict new survey items with interviewers, not just with Rs.

Recommendations for Future Directions

- Recommendations for Rs training:
  - How to probe sensitive/difficult questions or contexts
  - Why questions are included on the survey and how to effectively explain complex concepts to Rs.

- Use standard probes to improve consistency across is.

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Conclusions

- Learning from is about what obstacles they faced was useful to understand how to develop realistic data collection methods, and to help improve training and support.

- Is adapt to Rs in real-time, while maintaining rapport that are sensitive, difficult, or may require additional probing, e.g.:
  - “Distancing by showing respondents the CAPI screen:
    - Avoiding answering certain questions/topics
    - Encouraging estimation or recall from memory
    - Talking about lead-ins
    - Shortening questions:
    - Not probing particular answers

- The use of vignettes added additional depth in understanding how is make these decisions during the survey process.

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