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Exploring Confidentiality Issues Related to Dependent Interviewing: Preliminary Findings[1]

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Several surveys employ a panel design in which respondents are interviewed at multiple points in time ("waves") over the course of several months, or even years, in order to investigate the dynamics of certain life events. Many of these surveys use some form of "dependent" interviewing in which information gathered in one wave is carried over into subsequent waves in an attempt to reduce repetitiveness and burden, aid recall, reduce spurious change, and generally provide a sense of continuity over the life of the survey. Recent efforts to improve the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) have begun to focus on understanding and improving these dependent interviewing techniques. A related research effort has recently begun at the U.S. Census Bureau (which administers the SIPP) regarding its new "Respondent Identification Policy" or RIP. This policy, implemented in 1998, is designed to ensure that responses are not shared among individuals within a household unless the respondent has given consent for this. The implementation of dependent interviewing techniques and the new RIP policy prompted the current research. The main goals were to develop and assess a RIP item – a request for consent to share the respondent's data with other household members during later waves – and to explore respondents' reactions and concerns about dependent interviewing in general. In the service of those goals, the current research had several components. First, respondent debriefings were conducted following a Wave 1 interview to explore: (1) their reactions to the RIP item; and (2) their attitudes toward confidentiality and dependent interviewing. The debriefing findings were used to further refine the RIP item, and then the original and the new RIP item were evaluated in a Wave 2 follow-up debriefing. In addition, Wave 2 cognitive interviews were conducted to assess respondents' overall reactions to dependent interviewing. Results from these exploratory inquiries indicate that some respondents expressed concerns about sharing information with children and about sharing financial information more generally. In general, respondents reacted positively to dependent interviewing techniques and most had no privacy or confidentiality concerns. Among the limitations of the research are: (1) its qualitative nature (testing was conducted on small numbers of respondents not selected at random, and semi-structured interviewing techniques – versus standardized interviewing – were used), (2) the survey context (topics within the SIPP include income, earnings and health insurance; other topics of a more or less sensitive nature may not yield the same results) and (3) the

[1] This report is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion of work in progress. The review expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

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face-to-face lab setting, which may promote more trust and rapport-building than would be found in an actual field test.

Key words: Dependent interviewing; confidentiality; privacy; respondent debriefing; cognitive interviewing.

1. Introduction

Several surveys employ a panel design in which sample members are interviewed at multiple points in time (waves) over the course of months, or sometimes years, in order to investigate the dynamics of certain life events. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and the University of Michigan's Panel Survey of Income Dynamics (PSID) both use this technique to study changes in labor force participation, government program assistance, income, and other indicators of well-being. Many of these surveys use some form of "dependent interviewing," in which information gathered from one interview is used in subsequent interviews to remind the respondents of previous answers, to address inconsistencies between current and previously reported information, and to provide continuity from wave to wave, promoting a more natural flow of the interview.

Recent efforts to improve the SIPP have begun to focus on improving dependent interviewing techniques, but have been hindered by the lack of research in the area. In a recent literature review, Mathiowetz and McGonagle reported that dependent interviewing appeared to be effective in certain very targeted situations, but that "the empirical literature is very limited with respect to experimentation in the design phase of dependent interviewing and is weak with respect to the assessment of the impact of dependent interviewing" (Mathiowetz and McGonagle 2000, p. 407). The authors further reported that the effects of dependent interviewing on respondents' perceptions and attitudes regarding the confidentiality of their data are both unclear and undocumented. They suggested, for example, that respondents might have concerns about sharing data from previous interviews with other household members, or different interviewers, at subsequent wave interviews. For lack of any empirical evidence on the topic, the authors recommended qualitative research such as focus groups and debriefings to explore the issue further.

For U.S. Census Bureau surveys, the matter was further complicated in 1998 by the implementation of a Respondent Identification Policy (RIP) on sharing personal information within a household in panel surveys and reinterview situations. The policy states that:

> The Census Bureau may provide that personal information to (an)other individual(s) in the household only if the respondent authorizes us to do so in general or by giving us the name(s) of people who can be given that information. The Census Bureau may always provide personal information to the same person who originally provided the information (Gates 1998).

Because of this new policy, and because the literature is limited, the current research was conceived as an exploratory effort to understand the general themes that emerge when respondents are questioned about within-household data sharing and dependent interviewing. More specifically, the main goals were to develop and assess a RIP item

– a request for consent to share the respondent's data with other household members during later waves – and to explore respondents' reactions and concerns about dependent interviewing in general. The methodological approach was to "cast a wide net" by employing a number of different measurement techniques, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, in order to identify a broad range of issues relevant to respondents. Methods included respondent debriefings (both open- and closed-ended), paraphrasing, vignettes, and cognitive interviewing. Analysis also included results from previous large-scale field tests that included a RIP item, and a recent literature review on dependent interviewing.

Though the RIP policy and dependent interviewing are intertwined, they are not interchangeable. That is, in many cases dependent interviewing can be conducted without the need to obtain consent to share data among household members. Single-person households are in this category, as are all other households where the same individual is interviewed from wave to wave. Indeed, in a large-scale field experiment of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (specifically the SIPP Methods Panel 2001 Wave 2 Survey), 75% of Wave 1 respondents conducted their own interview in Wave 2 (Doyle 2002), rendering RIP irrelevant since "the U.S. Census Bureau may always provide personal information to the same person who originally provided the information" (Gates 1998). Findings related to RIP, then, are relevant to dependent interviewing in only a subset of cases – those where *different* household members will or could be interviewed in subsequent waves. For the current research we focus on only households with more than one eligible respondent since we are interested in situations where the RIP policy could affect the use of dependent interviewing procedures.

2. Background

In order to comply with the RIP policy, the U.S. Census Bureau has been exploring various ways of requesting respondents' permission to share their data with other household members. Both large-scale field tests and cognitive testing of this "RIP request" have been conducted over the past three years. In February of 2001, four different versions of the RIP request were tested in the cognitive lab in an iterative fashion with a total of 20 respondents. When problems were identified by one round of respondents (usually 3–5 respondents), the RIP request was modified accordingly and retested on the next round of respondents. In some versions, many respondents misinterpreted the request, erroneously thinking the U.S. Census Bureau would be attempting to recontact the household to verify information provided by the initial respondent, not to update the information (DeMaio and Hughes 2001). The final round of testing used wording that appeared to present few comprehension problems (see Figure 1, first row). Testing in this round indicated that all five respondents seemed to comprehend the intent of the request, though one stated that the term "starting point" was ambiguous.

Several large-scale field tests that included a RIP request with a wording very similar to this have been conducted to determine the extent to which respondents would decline, thus potentially preventing the use of dependent interviewing procedures in future waves. Table 1 displays the percentage of respondents who declined the RIP request in each test. "Decline" in the context of this table means the respondent said "no," "don't know" or "refused" to the RIP request, or was not asked. In practice, any non-yes answer to the RIP

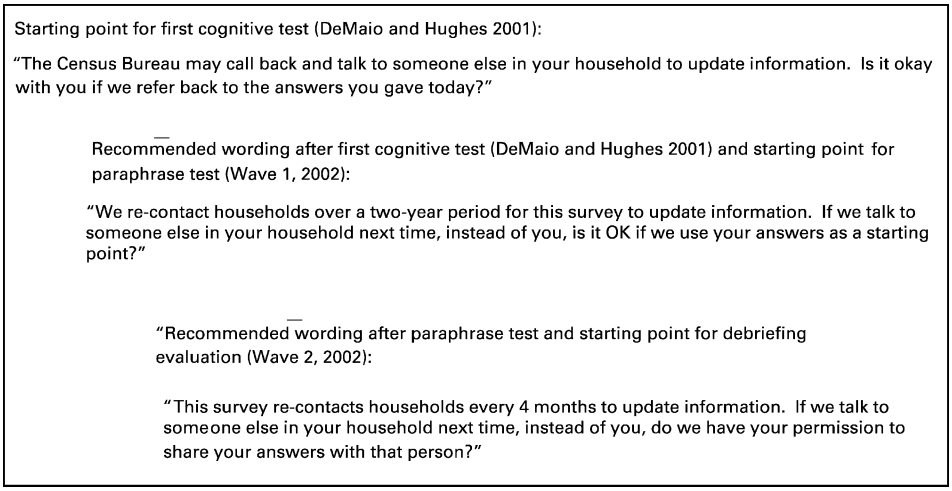

Fig. 1. Evaluation and testing of wording of the RIP request

request functions within the instrument is the same as a "no." That is, unless the respondent explicitly says "yes" to the RIP request, we err on the side of caution and assume the respondent would not want his or her answers shared with other household members. In the case of the QDERS and AHS surveys, this decline rate is the percentage of household respondents who declined the RIP request. However, in the MPSIPP, a self-interview is attempted with all adults aged 15 years or older, thus the decline rate is the percentage of all adults who declined the RIP request, on behalf of themselves and their proxy respondents. It should be noted that in the two studies with the highest rates of decline (MPSIPP 2000 at 21.4% and MPSIPP 2001 at 12.7%), the RIP request was implemented poorly, such that many respondents were unable to answer their own RIP request and were coded as "declined" by default. When the implementation was improved in the next iteration of the survey (MPSIPP 2002) to allow virtually all respondents to answer the RIP request for themselves, the rate of decline dropped to 8.9%. Thus, with proper implementation the rate of decline appears to be in the range of 6–12%.

Three of these studies (AHS, MPSIPP 2000, and QDERS) also investigated demographic characteristics associated with declining the RIP request. While there were slight inconsistencies across the three studies on Hispanic origin and race characteristics, all three studies showed that declining RIP was associated with not being married, having less than a high school education, and owning few financial assets. Two of the three studies (AHS and QDERS) also indicated that females and those aged 65 or older were more likely to decline RIP. Finally, and somewhat surprisingly, these two studies indicated that the level of declining the RIP request was almost identical in households with and without non-relatives (Bates 2000; Bates, Doyle, and Gates 2001; Loomis 1999).

Note that several design features vary across surveys, and that some of these features may be correlated with respondents' answers to the RIP request. Survey topics, for example, and respondents' subjective perceptions of the sensitivity of those topics, could well influence how willing they would be to share data within the household. Similarly, in some surveys household members as young as 15 are interviewed, and they may be more

Table 1. Respondents declining RIP request in large-scale field studies

Survey and references	Survey topics (in addition to demographics)	Length	Respondent eligibility	Mode	Response rate	RIP decline rate
QDERS 1999 (Loomis, 1999)	Disability, health insurance, assets	15 min.	18 years old or older (one respondent/household)	Telephone paper-and-pencil	40%	5.7%
AHS, 1999 (Bates, 2000)	Housing characteristics (number of rooms, housing value, etc.)	35 min.	15 years old or older (one respondent/household)	Face-to-face CAPI	91%	11.9%
MPSIPP 2000 (Bates, Doyle, Gates, 2001)	Labor force and earnings, government program assistance, assets, health insurance	30 min.	15 years old or older (self-interview conducted with all adults 15+)	Face-to-face CAPI	83%	21.4%
MPSIPP 2001 (Doyle, 2002)	Same as MPSIPP 2000	30 min.	Same as MPSIPP 2000	Face-to-face CAPI	84%	12.7%
MPSIPP 2002 (Pascale, 2002)	Same as MPSIPP 2000	30 min.	Same as MPSIPP 2000	Face-to-face CAPI	88%	8.9%

QDERS is the Questionnaire Design Experimental Research Survey; AHS is the American Housing Survey, and MPSIPP is the Methods Panel Survey of Income and Program Participation.

concerned with their data being shared within the household than older household members. The opposite may also be the case: older respondents may be especially concerned about having their answers revealed to very young adults. Mode may also play a role. In face-to-face surveys the interviewer has a better chance of establishing rapport and building trust with the respondent, which could influence respondents' general willingness to be helpful to the survey process.

Whereas these results provide insight into *who* declines RIP, they provide no direct data on *why* respondents decline. To address that question, two of the studies (QDERS and MPSIPP 2002) included an open-ended follow-up question asking those who declined the RIP request what concerned them about the request. Results from these studies were fairly similar (see Table 2), and suggest that most respondents who declined the RIP request misunderstood the question (Loomis 1999; Pascale 2002). In both studies the main reason cited by respondents who declined (38% in QDERS; 42% in MPSIPP) was concern that other household members would be poor candidates with whom to conduct a follow-up interview – because they would be either unwilling, unable (due to a physical or mental disability, or a lack of knowledge about household affairs), or too young. Below are some typical examples recorded by interviewers:

- my husband won't answer – you are lucky you got me to answer
- I know the information best and spouse will not do survey
- husband can't hear well on the telephone
- husband has Alzheimer's
- grandmother is 90 and does not know anything
- prefers not to have daughter speak to us as only 16 and not aware of all items in household

Table 2. Respondents' reasons for declining RIP request

Response	Respondents			
	QDERS		MPSIPP 2002	
	n	%	*n*	%
A. Concerned with privacy/confidentiality (nonspecific)	9	17%	9	20%
Explicitly concerned about sharing data with other household members	NA	NA	(3)	(7)
Concerned about sharing data, but not clear if within or outside household or both	NA	NA	(6)	(13)
B. Does not like to give the government any information	1	2%	2	4%
C. Concerned that other household members would not, could not or should not conduct next interview	20	38%	19	42%
D. Language concerns or barrier	NA	NA	2	4%
E. Does not want to be contacted again	6	12%	NA	NA
F. Not enough information to code	16	31%	13	29%
TOTAL	52		45	

Note: "NA" indicates that the reason appeared only in one of the two surveys' open-ended responses.

In spite of this dominant finding, a nontrivial minority of RIP decliners did voice privacy and confidentiality concerns – 17% in QDERS and 20% in MPSIPP. It is not entirely clear, however, how many of these respondents had explicit concerns about sharing data with other household members (versus more general confidentiality concerns), since coding conventions across the two studies varied slightly. The QDERS study included only one overall category on privacy/confidentiality. The MPSIPP study, however, included two subcategories within this broad category – those who expressed explicit concerns about sharing data with other household members, and those who expressed confidentiality concerns but did not clearly indicate a concern regarding other household members. Only 3/45 (7%) of the MPSIPP cases explicitly voiced a concern about sharing data with other household members. Presumably some – perhaps all – of the nine QDERS and the six MPSIPP respondents who expressed nonspecific privacy/confidentiality concerns were indeed concerned about sharing data within the household, but due to the generalized category it is impossible to tease apart those who had concerns about other household members in particular. It appears from these two studies, then, that among the respondents who declined the RIP request, as few as 7%, or as many as 20%, are concerned about their data being shared with other household members. Even at the high extreme, prevalence of the type of confidentiality concerns the RIP policy was designed to protect is fairly low among those who decline the RIP request.

Finally, in almost one-third of the cases in each study (31% in QDERS; 29% in MPSIPP 2002) the reason for declining RIP was uncodeable. While this is a nontrivial number of cases, it is very difficult to speculate on how these answers, if codeable, would have affected the distribution. Therefore we simply note that the stability of these results is vulnerable due to the relatively high level of missing data.

3. Study Design and Methods

3.1. Overview

The current research project approached RIP and dependent interviewing, and associated privacy and confidentiality concerns, from several different angles. The data for analysis was produced primarily from several rounds of cognitive interviewing and respondent debriefings across two waves of interviewing. Table 3 summarizes each research component and its goals. First, straightforward Wave 1 interviews were conducted, followed by paraphrasing, vignettes and respondent debriefings to explore: (1) respondents' attitudes toward privacy and confidentiality and toward providing and sharing information within the household; and (2) their reactions to the RIP request. These findings were used to further refine the RIP request. Four months later (SIPP's standard interval between interview waves), the same respondents were recontacted for a Wave 2 follow-up interview, which included dependent interviewing techniques. Cognitive interviews were used to assess the Wave 2 instrument, followed by respondent debriefings to evaluate respondents' reactions to the original and revised RIP requests, and to probe their general reactions to dependent interviewing.

Table 3. Research methods and goals, Wave 1 and Wave 2

Research method	Goal
Wave 1	
Baseline Wave 1 interview ($n = 40$)	Gather data to "feed back" using dependent interviewing techniques in Wave 2 interview
Paraphrasing ($n = 28$)	Ask respondents to paraphrase RIP request (see Figure 1 for wording)
Vignettes ($n = 28$)	Present respondents with examples of the ways in which data would be shared within the household; gauge respondent comprehension and concerns about data sharing
Open- and closed-ended debriefings ($n = 27$)	a. Probe respondents about their general comfort level with sharing data b. Explore whether this varies by type of data or household member c. Probe respondents' understanding of privacy and confidentiality
Wave 2	
Cognitive interviewing ($n = 23$)	General cognitive interviewing, focusing on items which included dependent interviewing techniques (e.g.: "Last time I recorded you owned a savings account. Do you still own a savings account?")
Respondent debriefings ($n = 23$)	Probe general reactions to dependent interviewing techniques
RIP request ($n = 23$)	a. Ask if answer to RIP request would change after having been through an actual Wave 2 interview b. Present alternative versions of RIP request; probed for preferences

3.2. Wave 1

3.2.1. Baseline interview

This interview was conducted using the Methods Panel Survey of Income and Program Participation 2001 core instrument, covering the following main topics: demographics, labor force participation and earnings, government program participation, asset ownership and earnings, and health insurance. Altogether 34 respondents were recruited using various sources including the U.S. Census Bureau's respondent database, welfare centers, and word-of-mouth among staff. Because the objective of the research was to examine sharing data among adults within a household, only respondents living in households with two or more adults were recruited. The pool of respondents was diverse with regard to major demographic characteristics (age, race, income, education), though 3/4 of respondents were female and only 1/4 were male. Interviewing was conducted in June through August of 2001 by U.S. Census Bureau staff. Within the 34 households, a total of 74 adults eligible for a self-interview were identified. Among those 74 adults, 40 conducted their own self-interview and also conducted proxy interviews for the

remaining 34 unavailable household members. Each of these 40 respondents was paid $30 for their participation, and interviews lasted roughly one hour. The main objective of this baseline interview was simply to collect the Wave 1 data in order to "feed back" the information using dependent interviewing techniques in a Wave 2 follow-up interview.

Immediately following the baseline Wave 1 interview, the 34 respondents who were the original contacts within the household went on to participate in follow-up qualitative data collection, as described below. Due to time constraints in some cases, only a subset of these 34 respondents participated in any given activity, as indicated in Table 3.

3.2.2. Paraphrasing

Respondents were asked to paraphrase the RIP request – to simply state in their own words what they thought the RIP request was asking. The objective was to learn more about whether the wording of the RIP request was being interpreted as intended.

3.2.3. Vignettes

Because the concept of feeding back prior data, and thus possibly sharing that data with other household members, could prove too arcane for respondents to truly understand and carefully consider, vignettes were used to provide examples of the ways in which information provided in Wave 1 might be revealed to a different household respondent in Wave 2. The vignettes were used to shed further light on respondents' understanding of the RIP request, to gauge their "sensitivity level" to sharing certain types of information, and to determine whether they would change their initial answer to the RIP request after having heard some specific examples of how data from the Wave 1 interview might be shared with another household member.

3.2.4. Debriefings

Additional debriefing questions explored respondents' feelings and comfort level with allowing the information they provided in the Wave 1 interview to be shared with other household members in a subsequent interview. Respondents were probed on certain themes, such as whether their comfort level depended on the type of information that would be shared, or on the particular household member with whom the information would be shared. Other related themes were explored, such as the respondents' perceptions of the terms privacy and confidentiality and the distinction between the two.

3.3. Wave 2

3.3.1. Cognitive interviews

Four months after the Wave 1 baseline interview, respondents were re-contacted for a Wave 2 interview. Due to attrition, only 23 of the original 34 households were reinterviewed. Respondents were again paid $30 and interviews lasted roughly one hour. In most cases we were unable to ascertain the reasons for attrition; rather, respondents were unresponsive to messages, or they agreed to participate but then did not commit to an interview time and date. There were no obvious patterns with regard to demographic characteristics of those who failed to participate in Wave 2. In contrast to the straightforward Wave 1 interview, the Wave 2 interview was conducted as a cognitive interview, with probing focusing

on questions and phrases employing dependent interviewing, such as "Last time I recorded that you worked for (Employer X). Do you still work for (Employer X)?" Respondents were asked if these types of phrases caused them any concern.

3.3.2. Respondent debriefings

At the conclusion of the cognitive interview, a short debriefing was conducted to assess respondents' general reaction to dependent interviewing techniques. Respondents were asked if they were surprised or concerned that the interviewer had the capability to feed back data gathered in Wave 1, whether the Wave 2 interview (particularly dependent interviewing techniques) worked the way respondents expected, whether they had any concerns if different interviewers conducted Wave 1 and Wave 2 interviews, and whether they felt that dependent interviewing helped or hindered the interview process. Finally, respondents were asked about their recall of the RIP request and whether they felt any differently about their answer after having experienced a Wave 2 interview.

3.3.3. Wording of RIP request

Findings from the Wave 1 debriefing described above were used to craft a revised RIP request that would address weaknesses in the question wording that were identified in Wave 1 (see Figure 1). Both the original and the revised RIP request were presented in the debriefing and respondents were asked to compare them on clarity and ease of understanding.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Wave 1

4.1.1. Baseline interview

Three of the 40 adults who conducted self-interviews declined the RIP request in the Wave 1 baseline interview.

4.1.2. Paraphrasing

The Wave 1 debriefings began by asking respondents to paraphrase the RIP request that was addressed to them at the end of the Wave 1 interview (see Figure 1). The paraphrasing exercise revealed a number of findings regarding the clarity of the RIP request. Among the 28 people providing a response to the RIP paraphrase, 20 (71%)[2] seemed to understand the RIP request and 8 (29%) seemed not to. The misunderstanding appeared to be, in part, a misinterpretation of the phrase "as a starting point" (see also DeMaio and Hughes 2001). A number of respondents did not understand that this meant the interviewer would be sharing their answers with other members of their household on subsequent visits. Instead respondents thought that their answers would be used as examples to explain questions

[2] Percentages throughout the "Results and Discussion" section should not be interpreted as statistics, given the small number of respondents studied and the nonsystematic sampling method. We provide percentages strictly as a convenience to the reader, since the base of respondents varies across method. Numerator and denominator data are also shown.

to other respondents (not necessarily other household members), or that they were consenting to having the interviewers refer to the current data collection as a credibility check in the introduction for other household members in subsequent visits. For example:

> *"I wasn't sure. . .didn't really understand what it is to use my information as a starting point. I guess if someone didn't understand the question maybe you'd use my answers to explain."*

> *"What it means to me is that an interviewer may call and refer to this survey, this current interview, as a starting point, as an introduction as to who you are."*

Respondents' misunderstanding of the RIP request also stemmed from a misinterpretation of the people with whom the U.S. Census Bureau would share their information. Some respondents did understand that their answers would be used, but thought these answers would be shared with other respondents outside their household or others outside the U.S. Census Bureau. For example:

> *"That means somebody else in the same situation that I am might have another interview with somebody else. You want to talk to them and use the same techniques that you used on me."*

> *"It's basically asking me if it's OK that you use answers that I have already given."*
> *(And who might we be telling the answers to?)*
> *"I wouldn't know. . .outside of your office."*

A finding of particular interest had to do with respondents who *did* exhibit an understanding of the RIP question. In a number of cases these respondents indicated that what they were doing was giving "their permission" for the U.S. Census Bureau to use their answers as a reference in subsequent interviews, even if the interview was conducted with another household member. For example:

> *"When someone from your agency comes back, or calls back, to discuss our information, and I'm not available, I have given my permission for someone else to talk to you and that you may use my words from this meeting."*

> *"That you conduct the survey every 4 months and the next time you conduct it you may want to talk to someone else in the household and you want permission to use the answers that I have given you."*

The way in which these participants paraphrased the RIP request suggests that the question is essentially asking them for their explicit permission to use the answers they have provided with someone else in their household. Based on these comments, a revised RIP request was drafted for subsequent testing:

> This survey re-contacts households every 4 months to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household next time, instead of you, do we have your permission to share your answers with that person?

In order to correct the misunderstandings caused by the original RIP request, the phrase "is it OK if we use your answers as a starting point" was replaced with "do we have your permission to share your answers with that person." This change was designed to be more

specific about the request for the respondents' permission to share their answers, and to be more clear about the people with whom their data would be shared. This revised RIP request was examined in Wave 2 debriefings discussed below.

4.1.3. Vignettes

As described above, three vignettes were used to provide examples of the ways in which information provided in Wave 1 might be revealed to a different household respondent in Wave 2. Examples were designed to go from "less sensitive" to "more sensitive" information; the first vignette asked about sharing information about place of employment, the second asked about receipt of food stamps, while the third asked about perhaps the most sensitive topic for this context – income from stocks. First respondents were asked if these hypothetical examples were similar to what they had in mind when they contemplated the RIP request. Only 4/28 or (14%) respondents said "no." Interestingly, all four of these respondents were judged, on the basis of their paraphrases, not to have understood the RIP request. Another four respondents, however, were also judged, on the basis of their paraphrases, not to have understood the RIP request, yet they said the vignette examples were what they had in mind. It is possible that these four respondents were simply exhibiting acquiescence bias, or that they really did grasp the dependent interviewing concept but had not been able to express it very clearly in the paraphrasing task. In any case, respondents who did not anticipate the types of examples provided in the vignettes were likely quite confused about the RIP request yet provided an answer. This suggests that a small but nontrivial number of respondents is fundamentally uninformed about what they agree or do not agree to regarding data sharing within the household; some may give consent but actually would not if they truly understood the request, while others may decline the request but for reasons other than confidentiality (as was shown in the field tests).

Regarding the sensitivity of the examples, many respondents were not especially concerned about any of the topic areas, but eight had some concerns about stocks, and two had concerns about food stamps. Five other respondents had no concerns about sharing data within the household, but again expressed concerns that other household members would not be knowledgeable enough to answer the questions.

The final issue addressed by the vignettes was whether or not respondents would have changed their answers to the RIP request after having heard some specific examples of how dependent interviewing works. The majority of respondents (24/27 or 89%) said they would not have changed their answer. Four of these respondents also reiterated their concern regarding certain household members not being knowledgeable enough about household affairs. Two of the three respondents who said they would change their answer to the RIP request both said they had no problems with interviewers sharing information with their spouses, but did have concerns about sharing information with their children.[3]

[3] Due to imprecision in the capture of the data, however, it is unclear whether this concern had to do with young children, teenagers, or adult children living with parents. Furthermore, respondents were not routinely notified that in SIPP only persons 15 years old and older are eligible for a self-interview. Therefore, it is possible that a number of respondents who were concerned about interviewers sharing information with children were thinking of young children who, at least in SIPP, would not be candidates to receive that information anyway.

Results provide some evidence that most respondents do, indeed, have a fairly good idea of the ways in which one household member's survey responses may be shared with another household member. Furthermore, results suggest that a sizable minority has some concerns about sharing financial data among household members, and a smaller minority is concerned about sharing data with children in the household.

4.1.4. Open vs closed debriefings

While several subthemes of dependent interviewing were explored in the debriefings, only two will be discussed here: respondents' reactions to having their data shared within the household, and respondents' perceptions of the terms privacy and confidentiality. For the former issue, two different versions of debriefing questions on sharing information within the household were asked. The open version asked:

> If I came back in 4 months and interviewed someone else in your household, and shared some of the information you gave me today about yourself, how would you feel?

The closed version asked:

> How comfortable would you be if I came back in 4 months and interviewed someone else in your household and shared some of the information you gave me today about yourself? (Followed by a 5-category response set, going from "very comfortable" to "very uncomfortable.")

Most respondents (8/10) who received the open-ended question said they had no problem with this; three of the eight said the other household members already know the information anyway. One respondent said she had no problem with us sharing information with her husband, but did not want us sharing information with her children. Again, two respondents expressed concern that other household members would not be knowledgeable enough to conduct the interview. In the closed-ended version, which explicitly focused on respondents' comfort level, 12/17 (71%) said they would be very or somewhat comfortable, while 4/17 (24%) said they would be very or somewhat uncomfortable. Follow-up questions were asked to determine whether the comfort level depended on which household members we would be talking to. Two of the four said no, and two said yes, specifying that they would not want us talking to their children. Other follow-up questions were asked to determine whether the comfort level depended on what type of information would be shared, and some respondents (3/12 or 25%) said financial data would concern them. Given the relatively small sample sizes, the substantive findings seem quite similar across both treatments: the majority of respondents (70-80%) are fairly comfortable with dependent interviewing. Some respondents, however, voiced concerns about interviewers sharing information with their children and sharing financial information.

Respondents were also asked a number of questions regarding the definitions of the concepts of privacy and confidentiality. In general, for personal interviews, the U.S. Census Bureau defines privacy as the minimization of the intrusion on the personal lives of the respondent by the manner in which information is collected, the nature of the information sought, and how that information is used. Confidentiality, on the other hand, concerns protecting the data collected to ensure that an individual's information is not released in

an identifiable form. The majority of respondents either explicitly said that the terms privacy and confidentiality meant the same thing to them, or they described both similarly as meaning not sharing information with a third party. These results support other recent research suggesting that respondents do not draw clear distinctions between the concepts of privacy and confidentiality (Martin 2000). As Martin suggested, if respondents do not discriminate between privacy and confidentiality, a threat to privacy could be viewed as a threat to confidentiality and vice versa. For the current research, this implies that the RIP request could be viewed as a threat to either privacy or confidentiality.

The closed-ended debriefing questions included two questions that specifically asked respondents on their opinions about the RIP request as it related to an invasion of privacy or a breach of confidentiality. Ten out of 15 respondents indicated that providing information about someone else in their household was an invasion of their privacy. On the other hand, five out of ten respondents who answered "yes" to the RIP request indicated that it would be a breach of confidentiality for the interviewer to reveal information that they provided to someone else in their household in a subsequent interview *if* the RIP request had never been asked. Whereas the RIP request does not seem to necessarily alleviate concerns about invading other household members' privacy, results of the debriefing interviews do suggest that the RIP request provides the appropriate notification to make respondents comfortable with dependent interviewing techniques in subsequent interviews.

4.2. Wave 2

4.2.1. Cognitive interviews

As described above, cognitive interviews were conducted on the Wave 2 instrument, which embedded data gathered in the Wave 1 interview in the following general manner: "Last time I recorded (x). Is that still the case?" For the most part, the dependent questions posed no problems for respondents, and there was no evidence that they elicited privacy or confidentiality concerns. The testing, however, identified other issues that could be problematic for general dependent interviewing. For example, one respondent had a job at the end of Wave 1 with Employer X, lost the job part way into Wave 2, and was later rehired by the same employer but in a different position. So the question: "Last time I recorded that you worked for (Employer X). Do you still work for (Employer X)?" caused her some difficulty. These types of ambiguities, however, could likely be addressed through a combination of interviewer notes and training that clarifies when a situation should be considered "continuous" and when it warrants being recorded as two discrete events.

A separate issue has to do with motivating the respondent to carefully consider real change between Waves 1 and 2. In two cases, both members of a married couple conducted a self-interview in Wave 1, but only one of the spouses conducted the Wave 2 interview, proxying for the absent spouse. In both cases the respondent had some difficulty answering questions on earnings from assets because the absent spouse had reported them in Wave 1 and was most knowledgeable about them. Both of these respondents said to record "whatever was in the computer from last time," and each case had different implications for data quality. In one case the Wave 1 data was

unavailable (due to a programming error) so she reluctantly checked records and found that there had been a change in income between Waves 1 and 2. In the other case, the respondent simply did not know about the accounts and did not have records available, so the Wave 1 reports were used as a prompt and then recorded as Wave 2 data. In this case it is likely that using the spouse's Wave 1 reports as Wave 2 data was more accurate than either the respondent's guess or a "don't know" response. So while one case suggests that the availability of previously reported data may decrease respondents' motivation to check records or otherwise calculate true earnings for the current wave, the other case suggests that Wave 1 data may be better than forced data from an unknowledgeable respondent.

4.2.2. Respondent debriefings

A short debriefing was administered at the end of the Wave 2 interview to probe respondents on various aspects of dependent interviewing. When asked if they were surprised by or concerned about the capability of the instrument to carry previously reported information from one wave to the next, without exception all 23 respondents said they were not surprised or concerned. Many volunteered comments like "It would have caused me concern if you made me tell you things I'd already told you," "I was delighted," "I expected it," and "I didn't expect you to throw it away." Most respondents thought dependent interviewing techniques made the interview go more quickly and smoothly. Two respondents, however, thought it did not make a difference, and one thought it made the interview go slower, saying that it gave her an extra task – first to remember what she said last time and then to figure out if there had been any change. When asked if it bothered them that their information was stored on the computer, again all respondents unanimously said "no." Several said they were not concerned about this because they had been given a confidentiality assurance. One respondent, however, had grave concerns about the promise of confidentiality, believing that the U.S. Census Bureau had sincere intents and desires to keep the information confidential but that if someone really wanted the data they could get it. Respondents were also asked if they would have any concerns if there was a change of interviewer between Wave 1 and 2. All ten respondents for whom the interviewer switched between Waves 1 and 2 said no – the interviewer switch did not matter.

Finally, respondents were probed about their recall of the RIP request, and whether after having been through a real Wave 2 interview they felt differently about their initial response to the request to share information within the household. Most respondents remembered answering the RIP request, and only three said they might have answered differently. Two of these respondents, however, were reacting to hypothetical situations. For example, one reiterated that she would have no problem with us sharing information with current household members, but might not want her information shared with a new household member.

4.2.3. Wording of RIP request

The Wave 2 respondent debriefings included a question that asked respondents to compare the original RIP request with the revised RIP request, and indicate which of the questions was easier to understand.

Original RIP Request:

We re-contact households every 4 months to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household next time, instead of you, is it OK if we use your answers as a starting point?

Revised RIP Request:

This survey re-contacts households every 4 months to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household next time, instead of you, do we have your permission to share your answers with that person?

Of the 20 respondents who provided information, four (20%) indicated that the original RIP request was clearer, 12 (60%) indicated that the revised RIP request was clearer, and four (20%) indicated that there was no difference in the clarity of the two questions. The preference for one version of the RIP request over the other seemed to be based, in part, on the conversational tone of the statement. For example, a respondent who preferred the original RIP request said:

"Well, it seems more to the point. It's not condescending. It's real easy to understand."

On the other hand, a respondent preferring the revised RIP request said:

"The second one is more direct. I would think if you were trying to gain permission and make it clear, then the second one is the way to go. . . (the original RIP request is) just a conversational question. It's not as direct."

The percentage of respondents who preferred the revised RIP request to the original RIP request, however, suggests that most respondents prefer a question style that is more specific about the request. Of particular interest were the comments respondents made about the specificity of the revised RIP request with regard to giving one's permission to use their information. For example, one respondent said:

"The second one is more clear. People realize what they're being asked to do. It makes people think that they really are giving their permission."

This was not always viewed as a positive attribute, however, with one respondent saying:

"Neither is more clear. The second one is more polite because it asks for permission, and people like that, but it raises the issue: "will I have something to give – do I want to give it?"

Finally, one respondent who indicated a preference for the first question suggested that the reason was:

"I think you might get someone to agree to the first one more."

Looking at these respondents' comments together suggests that the revised RIP request does more clearly articulate that respondents would be giving their permission to use the information that they provided for future interviews with someone else in their household. Interestingly, however, the respondents' perspective on whether or not this is a positive effect differs. On the one hand, being clear that they are giving their permission is a positive aspect. On the other hand, being clear that one can give *or withhold* information may increase the likelihood that respondents will not give their permission to use their answers.

This seems to put at odds the notion of maximizing cooperation (and possibly response rates) and maximizing respondent understanding of the request. We suggest that being clear and forthright with respondents is both methodologically and ethically appropriate, and the U.S. Census Bureau should not knowingly obfuscate the intent of messages. An additional caveat, however, is that a potential danger exists that drawing too much attention to the act of giving one's permission to use their data may unintentionally increase the respondents' perception of the sensitivity of the data, as has been found for confidentiality assurances (e.g., Singer, Hippler, and Schwarz 1992; Singer, Von Thurn, and Miller 1995).

This dilemma aside, the results of the Wave 2 debriefings indicate that most participants found the revised RIP request to be more clear and direct than the original. In the interest of maintaining the clarity of the question while attempting to avoid elevating levels of respondent concern, the following compromise RIP request might be appropriate:

> We re-contact households every 4 months to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household next time, instead of you, is it OK if we share your answers with that person?

By replacing the phrase "do we have your permission" with the more colloquial "is it ok" we believe this version of the RIP request reduces the chances that the question will increase respondents' concerns about the sensitivity of the data, while maintaining the clarity about the possibility of sharing their answers with someone else in their household. We feel this could be an appropriate replacement for the original RIP request.

5. Summary

The core findings are summarized here:

- Across several previous field studies, the percentage of respondents who declined the RIP request was about 6–12%.
- Among respondents who declined the RIP request, only 7–20% voiced clear concerns about privacy or confidentiality; the other 80 + % misunderstood the request, many believing it was a request for a subsequent interview with other household members. Indeed, respondents in the vignettes, in both debriefings and in field study RIP follow-up questions often expressed concern that other household members would not or could not conduct a subsequent interview.
- Both the vignettes and paraphrasing also revealed that a nontrivial number of respondents did not understand the initial RIP request – almost 30% misunderstood in the paraphrasing; about 14% in the vignettes. The paraphrasing also revealed something about the nature of the misunderstanding, indicating that the problematic phrase seemed to be the request to "use your answers as a starting point." Respondents also seemed unsure of the people with whom their information would be shared. A revised RIP request that attempted to remedy these problems was judged to be more clear and specific by most respondents in a later debriefing.
- Vignettes provided some evidence that most respondents had a basic grasp of how dependent interviewing works. Wave 2 cognitive interviews revealed that respondents had no problems with privacy or confidentiality in relation to dependent interviewing,

and the Wave 2 debriefings provided overwhelming evidence that respondents expect and want dependent interviewing techniques built into a panel survey.

- The open and closed debriefings both indicated that most respondents had no problems with dependent interviewing as executed in this study. In both the vignettes and in the open and closed debriefings, however, a minority of respondents said they had no problem sharing data with their spouse, but did have concerns about sharing information with children in the household. The debriefings also indicated that respondents felt the RIP request provided adequate notification on the use of dependent interviewing techniques.
- The vignettes revealed that, when presented with the most "extreme" case (revealing another household members' previously-reported stock earnings), almost 30% of respondents had some concerns, but none of these respondents said they would have changed their answer to RIP, even in light of the example. Two respondents, however, did specify that they would have concerns about their financial information being revealed to their children (not to their spouses). The closed-ended Wave 1 debriefings also indicated that some respondents (25%) had concerns about sharing financial data.
- Though respondents very much appreciated dependent interviewing techniques, there were some small indications that the method could introduce its own set of problems. Specifically, Wave 2 cognitive interviews revealed that in some cases the phrase "are you still (x)" could be ambiguous. There is also a risk that respondents will lose motivation to give careful thought to recent income and instead attempt to rely on previously reported amounts. On the other hand, in some cases that previously reported data may be of higher quality than new reports from a respondent who is simply not privy to the information on income.

6. Conclusions and Future Research

This research set out to develop and assess a consent request to use in implementation of the Census Bureau's new RIP policy, and to explore issues of privacy and confidentiality related to dependent interviewing. With regard to RIP, consistent with much of the literature on consent issues, we found that it is indeed a challenge to develop a survey question that balances the goals of succinct, comprehensible wording, full disclosure of what granting consent means, and a desire to avoid raising undue privacy and confidentiality concerns by calling too much attention to the issue. While it is not clear that the RIP wording we developed meets all these goals, we hope it makes strides in that direction and suggests several avenues for future research. Though evidence indicates that the wording of the revised RIP request we developed is an improvement over the initial wording, the revised version has not been tested in a "fresh" setting. Respondents in this survey had been through two rounds of interviewing, and had been probed extensively on the original RIP request, before being asked to evaluate the revised request. Furthermore, the final "compromise" RIP request is slightly different from the version tested in the lab. Specifically, we take a step back from the phrase "do we have your permission" (to share information) and instead suggest the phrase "is it ok" in an effort to be more conversational and less alarming. Accordingly, we would recommend both another round of cognitive testing of the revised, untested RIP request, and that any modified version of

the RIP request that is part of a large-scale or production study include a follow-up question asking respondents why they declined the request. Another approach to wording development would be to capitalize on the positive reactions to dependent interviewing we observed from respondents and test wording along these lines: "We re-contact households every 4 months to update information. To save time and reduce costs, where appropriate, we simply verify information provided earlier rather than ask the same questions all over again. If we happen to talk to someone else in your household next time, is it okay if we update the information you provided about yourself with that other person?"[4]

A second, more drastic approach to research on the RIP request would experiment with a 2-question approach. Given the findings that many respondents confuse the request to *share information* across household members with the request to actually *interview* other household members in 4 months, we suggest de-coupling the two concepts. That is, first ask/establish that a follow-up interview will be attempted in 4 months, *then* in a separate question request permission to share information from the Wave 1 interview with other household members. We realize, however, that this could create problems in the field. Most interviewers are reluctant to explicitly notify or request permission to come back for a follow-up interview, preferring to simply make the attempt when the time comes. Collaborative research with field staff may help produce a research strategy that takes this into account.

With regard to dependent interviewing, in general we found that almost all respondents want and expect it to be an integral part of the survey process, and that most do not have serious concerns about data being shared with other household members. The concerns that respondents do express appear limited to data sharing with certain types of household members (generally children and teenagers) and sharing certain types of data (primarily financial data). Given these findings, in theory it may be advisable to develop a consent-request procedure that is person- and/or topic-specific. However, considering the findings above suggesting that even the global RIP request, which covers all household members and all survey items, is often misinterpreted, it may be even more difficult to communicate a person- or topic-specific RIP request. Furthermore, implementation of such a specific consent request may prove to be a serious operational challenge.

Another major task for future research would be to explore these issues with other survey topics. As discussed in more detail below, privacy and confidentiality concerns are often context-dependent. Other future research could focus on relatively small glitches detected here, such as the ambiguity of the concept of "continuation" in some situations. Research could also focus on how to balance maintaining previously reported information with motivating the respondents to refer to records or otherwise calculate accurate recent figures.

Overall these findings suggest that the effect of privacy and confidentiality concerns on dependent interviewing may not be very severe. One of the main reasons is simply practical: in many households the issue will not come into play because data will not be shared across household members. In single-person households, obviously, there are no other individuals with whom to share the data. But in many multiple-person households

[4] Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the particular wording suggested here.

data will not be shared because either the households are effectively "one-respondent" households (only one of several household members is willing and able to conduct the interview) or the same adults will be interviewed from wave to wave. All these scenarios render RIP and any concerns about data sharing across household members irrelevant. As noted in the example above, in MPSIPP 2001, 75% of respondents in Wave 1 conducted their own interview in Wave 2 (Doyle 2002). Given this rate and the relatively low number of respondents who declined the RIP request in Wave 1, only 4.6% of all Wave 2 adult interview cases were devoid of dependent interviewing techniques on account of RIP. While these findings demonstrate the relatively low effect of RIP on production interviewing, there seems to be great potential to reduce that effect even further in light of the findings that only 7–20% who decline RIP actually have confidentiality concerns.

Among the limitations of the research are: (1) its qualitative nature; (2) the face-to-face lab setting; and (3) the survey context. All of the original research discussed in this article involved testing with a small number of respondents – forty or fewer. The respondents were not selected at random, but rather through word-of-mouth and other nonsystematic means. We employed semi-structured interviewing techniques, versus standardized interviewing, which could lead to wide interviewer variance. All of these classic features of qualitative interviewing make it difficult to apply the findings to a general population. Similarly, the face-to-face lab setting may promote more trust and rapport-building than would be found in an actual field test. That is, respondents may downplay their actual concerns about privacy and confidentiality given the face-to-face setting. The fact that respondents were paid could have also influenced their levels of cooperation and their desire to appear helpful. With regard to survey context, respondents' perceptions of the sensitivity of the survey topics could weigh heavily on their concerns about sharing data within the household. Gerber (2001) conducted an ethnographic study of the privacy context of survey response. Results revealed that respondents viewed the decision to provide "private information" as situational and dependent on the full context in which the request occurs. The main topics within the SIPP instrument include labor force activities and earnings, government program assistance, income from assets and health insurance. Testing on other topics of a more sensitive nature, such as drug use and sexual behavior, may not yield the same results. Finally, the current research explores dependent interviewing in household surveys only. Establishment surveys present an entirely different context, and findings may or may not be relevant.

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