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Comment

Cynthia Z.F. Clark[1]

Don Dillman has written a provocative article addressing difficulties in making innovations that focus on measurement and nonresponse errors in government surveys. His rationale for the lack of innovation is that there is a cultural difference between those who might be forthcoming with ideas for change (researchers) and those who are responsible for conducting survey programs (implementers). In Dillman's thesis this cultural difference is accentuated by the structure and hierarchy of many government survey organizations.

Much of what Dillman claims rings true to me from my base of experience working in four different roles in government survey organizations. These positions include: a researcher in the Statistical Research Division (Census Bureau), Assistant Division Chief of the Agriculture Division (Census Bureau) for Research and Methodology, Director of the Research and Applications Division (National Agricultural Statistics Service – NASS), and Director of the Survey Management Division (NASS). In the first assignment I worked in a research division outside the operations environment; in the second in a program division where I oversaw the application of statistical research and methodology to the division's program working with the operations management; in the third position I oversaw statistical and technological research, frame development and sampling, data collection, and survey design and coordination; in the fourth position I now oversee survey methodology, frame development, data collection, and survey design and coordination. From this experience I would like to contrast some important nuances between research and operations that Dillman did not capture.

Dillman asserts that there is a vacuum between research and operations in survey organizations. This is often true. For some reason, implementers in survey organizations often lack appreciation of the contributions that multiple disciplines can make to the conduct of surveys. Perhaps, this comes from the era when those managing survey operations became generalists. Their reliance on expertise was limited to survey sampling, computer systems design, and their area of survey application. Although the potential for substantive contributions to the conduct of censuses and surveys from other knowledge bases has been recognized more in the last decade, implementation of innovations from these disciplines has been slow. This is as expected because many government survey organization managers do not recognize the value that comes from diversity of knowledge bases within an organization, and thus, do not encourage cross fertilization of ideas.

I would agree with Dillman's statement that "the core value system of the research

[1] U.S. Census Bureau since April 1996, formerly of National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA.

culture in government organizations is statistics." Other research value systems have a presence in some survey organizations, e.g., technology and methodology research. However, the presence of technology and methodology research is often limited to statistical applications. The predominant application of statistical research has been in sampling and estimation, and quality control. There has been only limited recognition of the value of statistical, mathematical, operations, methodological (sociological, psychological, and anthropological), technological, and geographic research, for example, for survey improvements. The potential for survey innovations is lessened in environments that do not value contributions from multiple disciplines.

Another barrier to innovation in surveys is the desire for a quick fix. Quick fixes seldom rely on tested procedures. They generally can be categorized as common sense approaches. This mentality is most pronounced for surveys with a short time period between each subsequent data collection. Often those in operations are not willing to plan (or budget) for development and testing of ideas that might result in innovations, particularly if the desired result is not immediately foreseeable.

Dillman suggests more cross-division integration of staff doing survey methodology research with operations staff conducting surveys to accelerate innovation in addressing measurement and nonresponse survey error. This has been done at NASS with some success. NASS has located staff with training in survey methodology, psychology, sociology, and measurement research in the Survey Management Division, an operations division. In August 1994, the Survey Methodology Group was organized within a restructured Data Collection Branch. Staff in the Survey Methodology Group have both operational assignments (e.g., survey training, questionnaire design, survey publicity/promotion) and research/development assignments (e.g., research/evaluation of computer record keeping systems, research on motivators for survey cooperation, research/development of CATI monitoring systems, focus groups/cognitive aspects of questionnaire development). The staff have participated in survey working groups related to both operations and research assignments. As their work gained visibility, operations staff in the division requested training in survey measurement quality. Members of the group participated in the development and follow-up support for training focusing on the survey measurement process, coverage and nonresponse error, errors in design of survey instruments, errors from the interview process, and errors from the interview mode and setting.

Success in this area has been due to a greater awareness among those who make decisions about surveys of the expertise of survey methodologists. This came through their participation with others in discussing the details of survey planning and specifications and making suggestions where they could contribute from their area of expertise. Credibility was gained as others recognized that the methodologists had a different approach to addressing survey problems from their own, and as the success of their contributions was demonstrated.

A recent example from NASS illustrates the multidimensional aspects of innovation that benefits survey organizations. A staff member in my division had the responsibility to develop better procedures to use data on farm operations obtained from another USDA organization. The staff member recognized that systems expertise that he did not have was required and sought the assistance of a knowledgeable

computer systems expert. Collectively, they developed a proposal to design a system that has provided invaluable information at cost savings to our agency. As in the previous example in the area of survey methodology, the success of this idea depended on the collaboration of individuals with different knowledge bases.

Government survey organizations will need to be more innovative to survive in today's environment. This innovation needs to be broad based – statistical, methodological, technological, mathematical, geographical, operational, etc. Collaboration between disciplines will be required. An understanding of the process of research in innovation will be needed. The challenge of survey leaders will be to define organizational structures that facilitate this collaboration, bringing a broader based research culture in communication with survey and census designers and implementers.

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