

The Survey Reinterview: Respondent Perceptions and Response Strategies

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The survey reinterview is often used as a measure of response reliability. In a series of small studies about respondent reactions to being reinterviewed it was found that their perceptions of the need for the reinterview may affect the quality of the data they provided. In particular, there is evidence that the reinterview often may not be an independent measure.

Key words: Reinterview; response error; proxy reports.

1. Introduction

The perceptions of respondents about the purpose and usefulness of a survey certainly affect their willingness to cooperate. Those perceptions may also affect how they understand questions and how they arrive at answers. An especially important example of this is survey reinterviews. In reinterviews, a few or several days after an initial interview, a sample of respondents are recontacted and asked some or all of the survey questions again. Reinterviews are conducted to estimate response reliability, and also serve a quality control purpose (Forsman and Schreiner 1991). It is the quality control rationale that is typically explained to respondents.

While the reinterview is obviously an unusual request of respondents, little has been done to determine their reactions either to the request or to answering the same questions again. In the present research, we examined both these issues in a series of pilot studies. The first was conducted at the Survey Research Laboratory, University of Illinois and the last two at the Survey Research Center, University of Maryland, followed by a study in which a supplement about respondent perceptions was added to a sample of the Current Population Survey (CPS) reinterview telephone survey. As another way to understand respondent task performance in reinterviews, using a separate data set, we analyzed reasons for differences between the initial and reinterview.

2. Study Designs

A questionnaire about respondent perceptions of the reinterview was developed based on discussions with interviewers who had conducted reinterviews. Three initial studies with

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Table 1. Sample size and cooperation for reinterview surveys

Study	Number of respondents contacted	Interviews	Cooperation rate
Pilot 1	31	23	74.2
Pilot 2	57	52	91.2
Pilot 3	190	163	85.8
Census CPS test	—	341	—

progressively larger sample sizes were conducted (see Table 1). In each study, after an actual reinterview, the perceptions questionnaire was administered.

Each study was a general population telephone survey using a subsample of cases from a recent random digit dialing study. Respondents were told in the introduction that the reinterview was a quality control procedure. After administration of a sub-set of questions from the original interview, the reinterview perceptions items were asked. In the first and second studies, six questions were asked about respondent perceptions of the reinterview. The questions were³:

1. Do you think the reinterview was necessary?
2. Did you try to remember what you said the first time and give the same answer again?
3. Do you think that most people, some people, or only a few people would be bothered about being asked some of the same questions again?
4. Were you bothered about being asked to answer some of the same questions again?
5. Do you think that I am calling because the person who interviewed you did something wrong?
6. Do you think you gave more thought to the questions the first time you were interviewed, more thought this time, or about the same?

In the third pilot study in addition to the reinterview items, respondents were asked some new questions about the original interview, such as its length, date and the sex of the original interviewer. For these new questions, a random half of respondents were read a transition statement ‘‘Next, I have just a few NEW questions that were NOT asked in the earlier interview.’’

3. Pilot Study Results

No one refused to answer any of the questions and the number of ‘‘Don’t Know’’ answers was small. This suggested that it is possible to get responses to questions dealing with the reinterview process, keeping in mind, however, that these are the responses of the cooperators and do not reflect the views of those who refused to be reinterviewed.

The results are shown in Table 2. More than half the respondents rejected the explanation given in the introduction and said the reinterview was unnecessary. About 40% of respondents indicated that they were bothered by the interview, and 30% thought that at least some people would be bothered.

³ The last two of these questions were found not to be useful and were dropped after the first study.

Table 2. *Comparison of the university studies to CPS*

	Study 1 [N = 23] per cent	Study 2 [N = 52] per cent	Study 3 [N = 163] per cent	Census, CPS [N = 361] per cent
Others bothered [most + some]	30.4	56.7	74.8	70.8
Respondent bothered [yes]	39.1	32.7	20.8	52.2
Thought reinterview necessary [yes]	30.4	34.6	38.7	46.7
Tried to remember first answers and give again [yes]	34.8	53.8	41.7	47.0

It may be seen that the percentage of respondents who thought the reinterview was necessary ranged from 30% to 39% over the three pilot studies: the percentage who were bothered themselves ranged from 21% to 39%; and the percentage who thought others would be bothered was most variable, ranging from 30% to 75%. Between 35% and 54% of respondents tried to remember the first answers they gave and give the same answer again in the reinterview. This was also confirmed in direct quotations from respondents, and indicates that the initial and reinterview interviews cannot be considered independent measures.

Direct quotations from respondents were also recorded and coded by type of positive or negative answers. The reasons for the positive attitudes mainly mirror the quality control reasons given in the introduction. The most important reason for negative attitudes toward the reinterview is that the reinterview is repetitive. The reinterview was also seen as unnecessary and time-consuming.

4. The Census Current Population Survey (CPS) Test

4.1. Study design

In the census study, the four perceptions items were added to a sample of 341 respondents to CPS reinterviews. The respondents had been in the CPS for either four or eight months prior to the reinterview. Additionally, respondents were asked two new items:

- Do you feel the purpose of this interview was explained to you adequately?
- Would you have preferred a more detailed explanation?

4.2. Results

There was little variance on the two new items. Slightly over 90% of respondents thought that the purpose of the reinterview was adequately explained. And less than a quarter of respondents (21.2%) would have preferred a more detailed explanation.

On the items asked in all four studies (Table 2), the results are very much the same for whether respondents tried to remember what they had said in the original interview, and for whether they thought the reinterview was necessary. This latter item was not affected by sponsorship as we thought it might be.

Table 3. Reason for differences between self and proxy reports

Reason	Number	Per cent
Stereotyping	40	38.8
Lack of knowledge	34	33.0
Forgetting, confusion	29	28.2
Total	103	100.0

The census test results differ from the earlier findings on some key items. Also, unlike the earlier studies, there are some important differences by demographic characteristics for some of these questions. When asked whether they were bothered by the reinterview, a much higher proportion of CPS respondents were bothered than on the earlier studies (53% vs a weighted average of about 25%). Respondents ages 36–55 were more likely (61.4%) than either younger (18–35, 46.4%) or older (56+, 48.8%) to be bothered personally by the reinterview ($p < .05$). Respondents with any college or more education were also more likely (58.9%) than those with less education (45.1%) to report being bothered ($p < .05$). Those with annual household incomes greater than \$35,000 more often reported being bothered (56.3%) than those from lower income households (45.1%). In fact, in categories above 35,000 USD this trend increases monotonically ($p < .05$).

On the question of whether the reinterview was necessary, respondents with a college education were less likely (48.5% answering Yes) to think so than those with less education (58.7%) ($p < .05$). And respondents with household incomes above 35,000 USD were also less likely to think the reinterview necessary than those below that level ($p < .05$). The pattern by age was the same, with those in the middle group being less likely to think it was necessary than those younger or older, but this result did not reach statistical significance.

Finally, better educated respondents were more likely to say that they tried to recall what they had reported in the first interview and give the same answer ($p < .10$). Married respondents were also more likely to try to recall and report their previous responses than those who were unmarried. The patterns on income and age were the same as on the previous questions, but again were not statistically significant.

4.3. Analysis of reasons for differences between interview and reinterview

In the other component of our research, using a different sample of CPS reinterviews, we investigated reasons for differences between an initial interview and a reinterview. As part of the CPS reinterview process, the U.S. Census Bureau collects information giving reasons (reported by respondents and field representatives) why the original and the reinterview information differ. We examined and coded 200 such forms in which such differences occurred. Note that each form could contain information about multiple household members, and that differences might occur for more than one household member.

Initially, the reasons were coded simply to determine one of four possible sources of error responsible for the difference:

1. The interviewer,
2. The same respondents reporting about themselves,
3. The same respondents reporting about others, or
4. Different respondents.

The single largest cause of differences is changing the respondent between the initial interview and the reinterview (30.7%). The interviewer is one of the least important causes of differences (22.6%). This confirms the belief that there is more to be learned from the reinterview process about response reliability than about interviewer errors.

Respondents are more likely to change an answer in the reinterview about themselves than about another household member. This confirms a finding by O'Muirheartaigh (1991) that proxy responses are more reliable than self-responses. It is important, however, to determine whether this greater reliability of proxy reporting reflects that proxy reporters depend on a stereotyped memory of the usual behavior of other household members. In this latter case, data would be more reliable but less valid since actual changes from typical employment behavior would be underreported.

One way of beginning to explore this latter explanation is to examine those cases where the data were self-reported during an interview and proxy reported in the reinterview.

There are three major reasons given for the differences. Lack of knowledge and forgetting or confusion are the second (33.0%) and third (28.2%) most important reasons, but the single most important reason is the proxy's use of a stereotyped response (38.8%), while the self-report indicates an actual change. The reconciliation of differences between the initial interview and the reinterview provides a better understanding of the overall accuracy of responses.

The results in this analysis are based only on differences and cannot address situations where the same erroneous response was given in both the initial interview and the reinterview. It would be possible in future research, however, to ask respondents to talk about how they came up with their answers and how confident they are about their answers for selected questionnaire items.

5. Conclusions

The percentage of respondents reporting that they were bothered by the reinterview is higher for the census study than any of the others, and much higher than the third study, which included some new questions.

Several explanations are possible. First, unlike the other studies, the CPS is a panel study. Respondents had already been through four or eight rounds of interviewing before the reinterview, so that may have affected the perception of burden in the reinterview. Yet the percentage of respondents who thought the reinterview necessary did not differ markedly from the other studies.

Another factor, and one which turned up frequently in the open-end verbatims, is that respondents are explicitly told at the end of the CPS that they will not be recontacted for eight months or at all, depending on which CPS round was just completed. So getting a call a few nights after that interview invited negative reactions.

The results in the CPS study by demographic characteristics are particularly interesting. They suggest that there may be differential willingness to cooperate on reinterviews as well as different behavior in answering the questions. We suggest that a value of time model might be useful in explaining some of these differences. Respondents who are in their most productive career years, are well educated, and have moderate to high incomes may be less willing to devote time to a redundant task. They also use a response strategy

(recalling and reporting their earlier answer) that may be seen as a strategy to minimize the length of the interview. This result also suggests that the lack of independence between the first interview and the reinterview is more serious for this group than for the sample as a whole.

If this model is correct, it would suggest a direction for further research on reinterviews as well as having practical implications for the conduct of reinterviews. Although this group of reinterview respondents did not report wanting more information about the reinterview than other respondents, perhaps *different* information provided at the outset might affect both willingness to participate and the subsequent response strategies used. Only further experimental research can answer this important question.

6. References

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Received June 1994

Revised November 1996

Corrigendum

Groves, R.M. and Couper, M.P. (1996). Contact-Level Influences on Cooperation in Face-to-Face Surveys. *Journal of Official Statistics*, 12, 63–83.

The numbering of the two figures is incorrect. Both the illustrations and labels for Figures 1 and 2 should be reversed. Figure 1 should refer to “Householder strategies for evaluating the survey request” and Figure 2 should refer to “Interviewer strategies of tailoring and maintaining interaction.”