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

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I will probe about how they get paid. [Ask in real time during the interview] Has limited time

Research Questions

Sensitive Questions for Rs:

- **Topic**: Income, children, disability/health, taxes, demographics, education, employment
- **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.

Questions to avoid asking questions:

- What cues do Rs use to decide whether or not to probe?
- How does question sensitivity affect Rs?
- How often do Rs request additional probing, e.g.:
- **Stating obvious fact**: "I have to tell you? It's none of your business, I don't want to tell you.
- **Encouraging estimation or recall from memory**: "I will probe about seasons, this helps me probe more about the time frame.

Results

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

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 get more detail but it is a big ask."

- **Improve recall**:
- "I probe questions about what they have paid. I ask them to look at recent bills.
- "I will probe about seasons, this helps Rs recall."

- **Encourage estimation**:
- "I usually understand the questions but memory is a bigger issue. I ask for best estimates rather than precise answers."

Problems:

- It is described how they make the decision to probe or not, which fell into the following categories:
  - A response is inconsistent with a previous answer.
  - The answer does not match a response category.
  - Comparison/recall problems.
  - Confidentiality concerns.
  - Sensitivity/difficulty.
  - To verify an answer.

- **When to probe**:
  - Rs have limited time.
  - Rs are reluctant to participate or answer a question.
  - Sensitive topics/questions on employment.

Conclusions

- **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**:
    - "Are you currently doing any work for pay?"
    - "Isn’t this just graduated from college with my degree, I’m still looking for a job at the moment."

  - **Neutral vignette**:
    - "You are 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."

Recommendations and Future Directions

- 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.

Future Research:

- Use CAPI recordings to investigate question asking in the field.
- Research effectiveness of adding scripted probes into surveys.
- Use vignettes to gain insight into decision-making processes.
- Protect new survey items with interviewers, not just with respondents.

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