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EDITORIAL

Announcing a Special Issue on the Cognitive Aspects of Survey Methodology

Robert F. Belli

SARMAC and North American Editor

Applied Cognitive Psychology seeks to publish the best papers, in any area of specialization, that combine cognitive theory and application. One area, the cognitive aspects of survey methodology (CASM) movement, started 20 years ago (Jabine, Straf, Tanur, & Tourangeau, 1984) as an “attempt to build a bridge between deep interdisciplinary chasms” (Tanur, 1992, p. ix), has sought to strengthen collaborations between survey methodologists and cognitive psychologists for the benefit of both fields. To survey methodologists, theories and observations of cognitive psychology can be applied in reducing “response errors.” To applied cognitive psychologists, applying cognitive, communicative, and memory principles to problems in survey methodology has the potential to advance cognitive theory.

But during the past 20 years, the discipline of applied cognitive psychology simply has not exerted an appropriate level of influence, nor reaped a sustained level of rewards, in its association with the CASM movement. As Wright and Loftus (1998) have pointed out, most of the CASM effort is devoted, by design, to the benefit of survey methodology. “But this is really a two-way street. We should be asking what benefits cognitive research ... can achieve from this collaboration” (p. 467). Echoing a similar theme, Tanur (1999) has asked “why is the preponderance of CASM-related research ... neither guided by nor feeding back into cognitive theory” (p. 17)?

Both survey methodologists and applied cognitive psychologists share responsibility in nurturing a mutually beneficial dialogue. For their part, survey methodologists have not been as responsive as they could be regarding the potential role that applied cognitive psychology can assume in their work. At the same time, applied cognitive psychologists have not been as knowledgeable as they should be concerning the interesting and relevant work that survey methodologists are conducting. The extent to which CASM researchers and applied cognitive psychologists are lacking in their appreciation and knowledge of each other, works to the detriment of both their fields.

As is often the case, CASM researchers experience a certain amount of distance between themselves and the substantive survey researchers with whom they collaborate. Substantive experts, such as sociologists, economists, and epidemiologists, use the survey responses themselves as the source of data in their basic research. By contrast, CASM researchers are interested in para-data, such as measures of response accuracy, response latencies, location judgments, and verbal reports—measures that are typically used by

cognitive psychologists—which lead to insights on how data collection conditions affect questionnaire responses. Although this line of research is of interest to applied cognitive psychologists, CASM researchers have been almost exclusively approaching an audience, the readers of survey methodology journals and other similar outlets, who are not themselves well-versed in cognitive observations and theories. Because many CASM works have not been peer-reviewed by experts in cognitive psychology, that is, those who would encourage a thorough consideration of the relevance of cognitive theories for observed effects, the cognitive explanations offered by CASM researchers may be oversimplifications. In other words, the understandings as to why people behave as they do in different conditions are often not as complete as they might be.

As for applied cognitive psychologists, many are unaware of the extent to which cognitive theories and observations help explain findings in survey research, including those associated with information processing, autobiographical memory, categorization, source monitoring, social cognition, Gestalt principles, heuristic reasoning, episodic and generic remembering, psycholinguistics, implicit processing, spatial cognition, skill training, lifespan cognitive development, cognition and emotion, and problem solving. There is no doubt that cognitive theories and observations are not totally adequate in providing explanations for problems in survey responses, especially in light of other scientific ways of thinking about communication, and with the rapid expanse of new communication technologies, such as the Web. But such a lack in adequacy provides new opportunity. Applied cognitive psychologists would enjoy a dialogue with survey researchers working within the CASM movement, *especially* if the inadequacies of cognitive approaches were to be exposed, which would lead to more sophisticated cognitive theories. In return, both applied cognitive psychologists and survey methodologists would benefit from the discovery of more efficient methodologies that have been informed from the application of cognitive explanations to survey research. Further, applied cognitive psychologists may be able to develop generalizable cognitive theories that are applicable to more than one applied context. To cite one example, consider the possible extraction of similarities among the properties of verbal behaviour that underlie both eyewitnessing and survey responding.

The astute reader will note that there have been a number of journal articles and edited volumes, including the 1991 special issue of *Applied Cognitive Psychology* edited by Murray Aborn, which have highlighted the collaboration between applied cognitive psychologists and survey methodologists within the auspices of the CASM movement. Yet, these efforts have not led to a sustained dialogue, and time is ripe for another attempt. Those of us in SARMAC would like for survey methodologists to take another look our way; accordingly, CASM-oriented manuscripts are being invited for submission to a special issue of *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, with an expected publication date of 2006. In addition to myself, Daniel Wright of the University of Sussex, and Fred Conrad of the University of Michigan, will be serving as co-editors of this special issue. Wherever your location, please forward manuscripts directly to me (see “Notes for Contributors” for contact information on back overleaf of any journal issue); manuscripts received by the end of 2005 will receive full consideration. Moreover, CASM researchers are openly encouraged to attend and to submit papers to our biennial, international SARMAC conferences. Ultimately, we would like for survey methodologists to think of *Applied Cognitive Psychology* as a reliable and worthy outlet for exceptional quality CASM-oriented work, not only now but also well into the future.

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