Research Paper

Interviewers, Interviewer Continuity, and Panel Survey Nonresponse

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\textbf{Abstract.} It is widely known that in practice, different interviewers have different response rates, though there has been no systematic examination of whether this is because of differences among interviewers or differences among those areas allocated to the interviewers (‘area’ effects), or both. Furthermore, the conventional wisdom in survey research suggests that it is advisable to have the same interviewers return to the same respondents in order to maintain good response rates in longitudinal surveys, though once again there has been very little documented experimental research to support this. This paper makes use of the interpenetrated sample design experiment in Wave 2 of the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) (i) to explore the effects of interviewers’ background characteristics and years of experience on response rates, (ii) to identify and estimate the differential effects of interviewers on response rates and compare the magnitudes of area and interviewer effects, and (iii) to investigate the impact of ‘interviewer continuity’. The analysis is facilitated by the use of cross-classified multilevel modelling. The paper also looks at the issue of interviewer continuity qualitatively, through the impressions of the interviewers themselves.

\textbf{Key words:} interviewers, panel surveys, nonresponse, interviewer continuity, hierarchical models.

1. Introduction

It has long been recognised that the job of the survey interviewer is the critical link between the survey organisation and address residents and much has been written about survey interviewing (see, for example, Hyman, 1954, 1975; Kahn and Cannell, 1957; Sudman and Bradburn, 1974; Dijkstra and van der Zouwen, 1982; Fowler and Mangione, 1990). What has received less attention is the impact of the interviewer on survey nonresponse.

1.1. THE INFLUENCE OF THE INTERVIEWER

A few studies have looked at the relationship between background characteristics of interviewers and nonresponse. The results do not offer a clear pattern. For ex-
ample, Fowler and Mangione (1990) found that female interviewers were more likely than males to be perceived as ‘friendly’. Morton-Williams (1993) found that several of her respondents said they would feel more wary of a male stranger on the doorstep, but Lessler and Kalsbeek (1992) in their review of the literature found little systematic evidence to support the view that male interviewers have lower response rates than female interviewers. Morton-Williams (1993) found that age of the interviewer was not important, but Lieresley (1986) reported that middle-aged interviewers had higher response rates than the younger or older ones. In contrast, Singer et al. (1983) suggest that the highest response rates are found with the older interviewers. Other research has looked at how interviewers dress (see Morton-Williams, 1993) and the voice quality of their voices in telephone interviews (see Oksenberg et al., 1986). Much less is known about the effects interviewer’s expectations and attitudes with respect to nonresponse. Singer and Kohnke-Aguirre (1979) reported that interviewer beliefs about item sensitivity could significantly predict the likelihood of their obtaining or failing to obtain responses on those items. A point well known by survey field managers, particularly with respect to questions on income. With respect to unit nonresponse, Campanelli et al. (1997) found that prior to making contact, interviewers were able to predict the likelihood of achieving an interview at a given address, but it was unclear to what extent this was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hox and de Leeuw (1998) are currently conducting an international comparison on the relationship between interviewers’ attitudes towards persuasion strategies and response rates. With respect to interviewer behaviour, early research experimented with varying the content of what the interviewer said ‘on the doorstep’ (e.g., Dillman et al., 1976; O’Neil et al., 1980) and later research explored the applicability to survey research of the principles of the psychology of compliance, helping behaviour, and opinion change (e.g., Groves et al., 1992). Empirical data clearly suggested that interviewer response rates correlate positively with years in the job (e.g., Durbin and Stuart, 1951; Lieresley, 1986; Couper and Groves, 1992). Although this finding is confounded with interviewers’ self-selection to remain as interviewers, one inference that can be drawn is that experienced interviewers’ success derives from their “larger number of combinations of behaviours proven to be effective for one or more types of householders” (Groves et al., 1992: 478–479). Recent research has focused on the details of the dyadic interaction between interviewer and respondent ‘on the doorstep’ (e.g., Morton-Williams, 1993; Groves and Couper, 1994; 1996; Campanelli et al., 1997). The work of Morton-Williams (1993) suggests that respondents have one of two basic motivation patterns for participating in a survey. ‘Extrinsically’ motivated respondents participate because they find the topic or purpose of the survey of inherent interest/value. ‘Intrinsically’ motivated respondents, on the other hand, respond because of their feelings about the interviewer and the process of being interviewed. Interestingly, Morton-Williams found that the majority of respondents were intrinsically motivated! Groves and his colleagues (1992) describe two information processing strategies used by respondents in making decisions. The