

Maximising Response: The interviewer's view

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Statistics are ideally an impartial tool used by the people for the people, using a truly fair sample of the people. I am a door to door interviewer for market, opinion and social surveys including longitudinal social cohorts. I have worked mainly in the South East of England, but also in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Like medical workers, waiting staff, actors, hairdressers and an ever increasing army of service workers, interviewers deliberately or unconsciously adopt a persona designed to engender trust and personal rapport, which can be called “emotional labour”(1).

Face to Face Interviewers are usually paid per interview, presumably we arrived at this convention by trial and error to facilitate cost control. Often an hourly rate or an enhanced fee is paid to follow up non-respondents in order to squeeze a few more percentage points out of the sample, and skilled fieldwork managers can design pay structures which reward the “extra mile”, to maximise numbers of interviews at minimised cost.

The interviewer's personal optimal hourly return does not always match the conditions for the highest response rate, and without other motivation (for example professional pride) it can be tempting to the Interviewer to write off more difficult cases as not being worth the trouble. For the Interviewer there is also a certain personal satisfaction in pulling that difficult respondent into the sample.

Response Rates vary between areas, regions and countries. For data on response variation between European countries, the European Social survey, ESS (2) is a good primary source. For local variations within the UK, the larger polling organisations have some internal records, but I don't know of any publicly available data.

The ESS was designed by academics to a high quality standard and included some controls for interviewer characteristics. It identifies Interviewer experience rather than identity as more affecting overall

response rates. However, Race concordance does affect response according another study (3) and this might well apply to Age and Gender too. Matching interviewers to respondents may therefore have some potential as a way of squeezing out another percentage point, if it is practical.

Interviewers' "Experience" includes a range of qualities such as tenacity, resilience, personal charm, weatherproofing and persuasiveness. Simply empathising and digging in to persuade a respondent that he or she is valuable and important can win an interview where all else fails, but this can take an hour! One colleague converted one of my refusals when he spotted a guitar in the garage and talked himself into an impromptu jam session, more enjoyable than the time I helped a respondent out with her weeding, but it still took him an hour to make the conversion.

The ESS tells us that 'external' characteristics of the interviewer are not particularly relevant. This matches my own experience as a trainer - successful new interviewers can be cheap and cheerful cockneys or serious and pensive ex-solicitors; it is the less tangible and more difficult to measure qualities of mental agility, empathy, confidence and opportunism which count.

There may be room for more serious research on key abilities for prospective and established interviewers. Field recruitment and training are significant expenses; appropriate and targeted support may well help retention and performance. Such research could lower field costs across the whole industry.

Emotional resilience is a key quality. Exposure to and empathising with large numbers of people can test one's inner boundaries. In a professional sense or from the employer's point of view this is not generally seen as being a very serious issue, generally the attitude is that one can do the job or not.

A dispassionate non-judgmentalism is an important quality. Even if an interviewer has strong personal antipathies, it is unlikely that this will be picked up in the data or even in performance appraisals. While the interviewer is likely to put it down to 'one of those things' rather than go into therapy or drama coaching at his or her own expense!

Antipathy and fear may arise from prejudice, oversensitivity or specific previous bad experiences. Psychological uncertainty can be countered by good briefing and insightful support from line managers and colleagues.

The range of responses an interviewer has to deal with on the doorstep is broad. We can be greeted as a welcome guest by those who

recognise the social value of statistics and with resignation by those who accept the process as a chore, a sort of national housekeeping function. All types of response are instructive in terms of how research is perceived and the interviewer builds up a repertoire of useful gambits.

Refusals, negative reactions and understanding the feelings of unwilling participants are relevant to raising the response rate. There are some interesting psychological effects for both interviewers and respondents.

It is impossible to enter into an extended and rigorously supported taxonomy of non-response here; the aim is simply to provoke interest in the subject from those with more advanced skills.

Although I work primarily for the money, much of my motivation and tenacity springs from wider the desire to establish a knowledge base to inform help for the families I visit. Missing people out of the sample is a failure of purpose as well as an economic loss. I have been personally upset by refusals from individuals and families which are dysfunctional, poor, or in crisis for various reasons. This is most particularly painful where children or the vulnerable are involved.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, but today's villages and neighbourhoods are socially fragmented by the effect of TV and the motor car. There may be stigma attached to some kinds of poverty in the southeast of the UK in a different way to other parts of the country, and without a doubt mental illness can create dysfunction in a family, guilt and shame amplifying the initial problem. So situations important to the purpose of some surveys can be, and I have no doubt are being, missed from the data.

Response is obviously a major issue in all Fieldwork. The National Readership Survey, NRS (4), uses a high quality sampling procedure on a commercial tracker which yields a 50% response on 5+ calls. The purpose of the NRS is specific, so the effect of non-response can be specifically assessed. But small groups are undoubtedly being missed on social surveys (and even the Census). Higher response rates give the appearance of more representative data, but where the purpose of the survey is simply to acquire data for analysis by bodies unknown at the time of commissioning, as in censuses and some social surveys, omissions due to refusals can have more impact.

I have in mind the cohort or social studies that one would expect to be the source material for designing social policies especially relevant to those same households who are proving most difficult to contact. For example, the Millennium Cohort Study (or Child of the New century) (5). On first glance the response rate of 85% on the last wave of this

cohort study indicates a good response, though it should be appreciated that the pool of respondents have been drawn from have participated before. (Typically, a 20-70% response could be expected in one off social or public goods surveys where there has been no prior commitment by the respondents.)

But within that segment of contacted households who refused to participate, there could well be a higher than average occurrence of relevant and material issues - divorce, illness, mistrust of surveys, social and psychological dysfunction. The whole point is that we do not know, because there has been a refusal to divulge information. Nor do we know, in the case of data collection for later use, what the salient questions are - there is a certain amount of guessing going on when any survey is written.

In the meantime, observation and subjective assessment are sometimes employed to add value to non-response data. And while it is argued that “the practice of using interviewer observations to make nonresponse adjustments has outpaced the theory underlying this methodology” (6), in practice if the use of an auxiliary variable actually adds accuracy to the result, then it is difficult for the layman to see why it should be excluded.

Most of the refusals will probably have a good reason unrelated to the eventual uses to which the data will be put, but the exceptions might be important. The following anonymised examples highlight instances where self-exclusion might be an important omission to data users:

Example 1: Robbie expressed deep reservations about me talking to the randomly chosen child subject because he had been so much interviewed by social services about this and that and it was felt/claimed the boy had had enough attention. The interview was prematurely terminated for reasons of privacy. There was a pervasive feeling of anxiety and unhappiness around the place, no housework was being done, and the children seemed neglected and unwashed. Paradoxically, amidst all this, the child that first came to the door seemed calm, and as I went to leave I noticed a naked toddler lying on a shelf in the hallway with his head propped up on his hand, with a beatific smile on his face.

Example 2: Timothy seemed open minded and was happy to be interviewed. The path from the front door to the kitchen was a sort of narrow winding mountain path which might not be out of place in the foothills of Everest. The mountains in this case were bags and bags of old clothes and other stuff, piled up so high the

corners of the room where they met the ceiling had disappeared over the horizon. I'm sure I saw a mountain goat with his beard fluttering in the breeze, standing proudly on the summit of one mountain peak in the distance, from the corner of my eye, but when I looked it turned out to be a bag of old socks. There was a sofa by the side of the winding path, for the benefit of travellers, where we did the interview about soap powder or some such. Meanwhile two kids played happily, sitting among the piled bags, drawing and chatting, while his wife made tea in the kitchen. I did feel privileged to have been trusted and accepted in an eccentric but apparently happy household.

Clearly it is not my aim to identify or diagnose problems. I am simply trying to illustrate the kinds of odd idiosyncratic circumstances which may or may not be getting picked up in the data collection phase.

Of course there are thousands of non-contacts; actively hostile; the round, red faced face man who threatened to kill me if I knocked on his door again, or the sick looking, sallow faced unshaven fellow who looked me up and down, and said sarcastically "Oh Yeah?" with the clear implication that I was obviously a criminal, before abruptly closing the door in my face.

Along with a sense of relief that I didn't have to talk to "those people" there are residual worries that people in trouble are suffering alone, potentially significant exceptional types are being missed from the sample, and that my personal response rate (and my pay packet) is less than it should be.

There are other 'difficult' people who are frankly a lot more entertaining: The alert, well informed middle class lady in an affluent area who refused to divulge any information because it will always be used by cynics to manipulate her into buying things she doesn't want or need, or the highly intelligent and principled young man who refuses to register the birth of his child because that act commits his child to be the property of the British State.

Statistics are very often seen as an arm of an alien controlling force, be that commercial or an overbearing state apparatus. These 'fun', bizarre and sometimes highly informed refusals are equally likely to be a source of non-response bias as any more sinister types.

Most refusals are for obvious reasons that we can fully understand and relate to as individuals: time, illness, dislike of the 'Authority'. These are people whose reactions and circumstances one can quite easily imagine being reflected by participants in the main sample. So the worrisome subjects are actually quite probably very few in

number. My experience certainly suggests that they are just one or two percent.

But that can be a very important minority. If social expense is being avoided by policy decisions and interventions based on survey data, inclusion of the few exceptional cases may be imperative.

More attention to interviewer training and background knowledge would in my opinion help interviewers to gather the raw data. The (economic and data quality and quantity) returns on that investment in training and briefing may be less certain, but I suspect they might well be significant. That obviously depends on how much the client values exceptional cases, which in turn strongly depends on the underlying reasons for gathering the data in the first place.

(1) Hochschild, A. (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press. See also:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotional_labour

(2) <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>

(3) Moorman, Newman, Millikan, Tse, & Sandler (1999) Participation Rates in a Case-Control Study: The Impact of Age, Race, and Race of Interviewer. *Annals of epidemiology* 9(3): 188-195

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S104727979800057X>

(4) <http://cls.ioe.ac.uk/MicrositeHome.aspx?m=1&sitesectionid=47&sitesectiontitle=Child+NC+Microsite&code=000160010002>

(5) NRS: <http://www.nrs.co.uk>. For the technical summary of fieldwork see:

http://www.nrs.co.uk/downloads/technical/fieldwork_and_results_251113.pdf

(6) The Error Properties of Interviewer Observations and their Implications for Nonresponse Adjustment of Survey Estimates, Brady Thomas West, 2011

(Dissertation paper)

http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/89715/bwest_3.pdf;jsessionid=7778544DC50C466905AFBBA5EC842F5F?sequence=3

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