

THE USE OF FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS TO IMPROVE
THE DESIGN OF AN ADMINISTRATIVE FORM:
A CASE STUDY AT THE SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

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Introduction

Depth interviews have been used for over 30 years in the fields of psychotherapy, public opinion surveys, and market research (7,2); however, they have not been as fully exploited nor integrated into the planning and design of controlled experimentation, as urged by early and recent advocates (3,5). This paper will describe the use of a particular kind of depth interview called the focus group. This technique was used by the Social Security Administration (SSA) with simulated applicants for social security account numbers (SSANS) to provide subjective information to aid in determining the best methodology for collecting race and ethnic data, which are collected through the SSAN application process. The findings presented in this paper will be used to illustrate that the primary benefits gained from using this technique come from its ability to illuminate problems in ambiguity, appropriateness and acceptability, which may affect the quality of data provided by participants in surveys and experiments. Therefore, the utility of the focus group interview findings for clarifying known issues and for identifying previously unknown ones for further exploration or controlled study will be considered.

The focused interview, as described by Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956), has as its main purpose the involvement of participants in an experience which has been provisionally analyzed by the investigator, to determine the effects of that experience on participants' attitudes, feelings and knowledge. Merton et al (1956) have described the nature and purpose of the focused interviews as follows: "First of all, the persons interviewed are ... involved in a particular situation: they have seen a film, heard a radio program, read a pamphlet, article, or book, taken part in a psychological experiment or in an uncontrolled, but observed, social situation (for example, a political rally, a ritual or a riot). Secondly, the hypothetically significant elements, patterns, processes, and total structure of this situation have been provisionally analyzed by the social scientist. Through this content or situational analysis, he has arrived at a set of hypotheses concerning the consequences of determinate aspects of the situation for those involved in it. On the basis of this analysis, he takes the third step of developing an interview guide, setting forth the major areas of inquiry and the hypotheses which provide criteria of relevance for the data to be obtained in the interview. Fourth and finally, the interview is focused on the subjective experiences of persons exposed to the pre-analyzed situation in an effort to ascertain their definitions of the situation. The array of reported responses to the situation helps test hypotheses and, to the extent that it includes unanticipated responses, gives rise to fresh hypotheses for more systematic and

rigorous investigation." (p. 3-4)

The decision to use a group rather than individual interview technique to explore the reaction of respondents to the proposed form was based on two advantages of the group method or process: (a) its greater efficiencies in cost and convenience, and (b) its positive effects on reaction through facilitation of recall and the "shared" experience. It must be noted that the group experience may inhibit rather than promote reaction by some respondents if the interview situation is not skillfully managed by the discussion leader.

Background

Since its inception in 1936, the Social Security Administration has collected race data from SSAN applicants in three categories; White, Black and Other. Race data, which are used for statistical and research purposes only, are currently collected administratively on Form SS-5 through the Application for Social Security Number (SSN) process. (See Appendix 1.)

In the past, SSN applications were most frequently filed as individuals were about to enter the work force for the first time, i.e., when they were of high school age. However, recent legislative changes requiring enumeration of public assistance program recipients and reports of income for internal revenue purposes, e.g., interest and dividend income, have resulted in the filing of social security number applications for many of the newborn as well as for young children.

In addition, about three years ago, several other events occurred which necessitated revision of the SS-5 form: 1. The administrative authority (under the Federal Reports Act) for SSA to use the SS-5 was due to expire; 2. The Department of Health and Human Services HHS/SSA had issued new regulations "tightening-up" the evidence requirements for obtaining social security account numbers. These requirements needed to be incorporated into the SS-5 application package as instructions to applicants who varied widely in functional literacy; 3. The Privacy Act of 1974 required that persons be adequately informed of the purpose and uses of data collected from them by Federal agencies. The "old" SS-5 form did not contain this information, although such information was available in separate pamphlets; 4. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Office of Federal Statistical Policy and Standards (OFSPS) had issued revised standards for collection of race/ethnic data (OFSPS Directive No. 15) by Federal agencies requiring coverage of groups not previously included in the SSA system, i.e., Hispanics, Asians/Pacific Islanders, and American Indians; and 5. Public Law 94-311 directed OMB and HHS to collect data sufficient to evaluate the social and economic health of the Hispanic population.

Although the focus group study conducted by SSA involved testing of the complete application form

and instructions, this paper will be limited to responses concerning the race/ethnic question. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that information obtained from respondents regarding the other questions on the form and the instructions was quite useful in the revision of the application package for subsequent testing and public use.

The race data collected by SSA are used internally for determining the race/ethnic characteristics of applicants and recipients of SSA program benefits. These data are also used by SSA and other Federal agencies, academic institutions, advocacy groups, etc. for a wide variety of research and statistical purposes involving economic, health, social welfare, civil rights compliance and other issues (8).

The importance of SSA's data base to the research community is, therefore, substantial in view of its varied uses, its historical continuity and its nearly universal coverage of the national population.

In view of the importance associated with the revision of the SS-5 form, and the absence of definitive knowledge about the most desirable method for collecting additional race/ethnic data required by the OFSPS Directive No. 15, it was determined that several stages of testing and analysis were desirable before the "new" application form could be considered ready for operational use.

Overview of Possible Testing Program for the Revised Administrative Form (SS-5)

The optimal research program contemplated the following steps: 1. The development of a test form and instructions incorporating information required by the changes in law, and policy described above; 2. in-depth individual or focus group interview studies of simulated applicants to determine their reactions to the new form(s); 3. revision of the form(s) and operational testing under experimental conditions of alternative collection methodologies suggested by analysis of findings from the interviews; 4. small group (controlled) experiments with simulated applicants utilizing debriefing interviews, to test revisions in the form; 5. approval of a final version of the form for operational use in all SSA district offices, and; 6. monitoring of results from operational use of the new form, differentiating non-response rates by (a) individual SSA district offices, and (b) manner of application, i.e., mail vs. in-person.

The Focus Group Interviews of Simulated Applicants for Social Security Account Numbers

As described above, the first step in the research program was to design an application form embodying an expanded format for collecting race/ethnic information. After review of findings from the Bureau of Census experience and discussions with their staff, a two-question approach to collecting race/ethnic information via the SS-5 (application) was developed for testing 15,67. The race/ethnic question tested also resembled one of the two formats described in OFSPS Directive No. 15. (See Appendix 2.)

In addition, the format of the race/ethnic item to be used on the SS-5 form was also based on the following considerations: 1. conservation of space; 2. apparent simplicity; 3. notification as to purpose and use of the information (required by the Privacy Act).

Available resources and time permitted a maximum of ten group interviews. It was decided to concentrate the focus group testing on Whites and Blacks (the major racial groups) and Hispanics (the major ethnic group which also had presented the most difficulty in enumeration to the Bureau of Census in pre-tests for the 1980 Census (see Fernandez and McKenney, 1980). Focus group interviews were determined to be the investigative method of choice because of their potential for illuminating questions concerning clarity, public acceptability and comprehensibility of the proposed race/ethnic question. Simulated, rather than actual applicants, were used as this permitted advance scheduling of the interviews which lasted about two hours. Dr. James Bayton, a psychologist on the faculty of Howard University, and specialist in focus group interviewing and forms design, was engaged to plan and conduct the interviews. Study scope and content were determined jointly by Dr. Bayton, Thomas B. Jabine, then SSA Chief Mathematical Statistician, and the author.

Methodology

Subjects/Sampling

Selection of subjects was arranged through SSA's Office of Enumeration and Earnings Records (OEER) and district office field staffs according to criteria supplied by the SSA Office of Research and Statistics (ORS). The basic considerations in the formation of each group were homogeneity of socio-economic status and age (sex was also a factor, especially among teenagers).

Whereas the principal applicants completing the SS-5 application form are (a) teenagers, (b) young adults applying for the first time (especially new immigrants), and (c) adults applying on behalf of their young children, the focus groups were constructed purposively to obtain data from each of the above types of individuals. Respondents were paid for their time--generally about two hours plus travel back and forth to the testing site. Adults were paid \$15 each for participating in the study; teenagers, for whom the interview sessions were somewhat shorter, were paid \$10 each. It should be noted that factors such as the use of simulated rather than actual applicants, payment to study participants, and the small size and number of groups limit generalizability of results and findings of the group sessions to the full SSAN applicant population. However, limitations regarding statistical generalization of the data should not be construed as restricting the utility of the data for providing valuable descriptive information, which although qualitative in nature is generally not available through the use of conventional survey instruments such as questionnaires. Data describing the group interview sessions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.--Focus Group Interview Data:

Date	Location	Respondents	Number
3-8-78	Washington, D.C.	Male teenagers; black; low SES*	10
3-10-78	Washington, D.C.	Female teenagers; black; low SES	7
3-14-78	Washington, D.C.	Male teenagers; black; low SES	12
4-3-78	Glen Burnie, Md.	Male and female teenagers; white; lower and middle class SES	14
4-3-78	Glen Burnie, Md.	Male and female teenagers; white; lower and middle class SES	14
4-3-78	Glen Burnie, Md.	Male and female adults; black and white; lower and middle class SES	15
4-10-78	Los Angeles, Ca.	Spanish-language background male and female adults; low SES	12
4-11-78	Los Angeles, Ca.	Spanish-language background; male and female teenagers; Asians (2); low and middle class SES	15
4-12-78	Los Angeles, Ca.	Spanish-language background; male and female adults; low SES	11
4-12-78	Los Angeles, Ca.	Spanish-language background; male and female teenagers; low and middle class SES	<u>14</u>
Total Respondents.....			124

* SES: Is an abbreviation for socio economic status, which also may be used as a proxy for expected level of functional literacy.

Procedure

The procedure was designed to have the individuals in each group complete the proposed new social security application form as if they were actually applying for a number. After an introduction by the group discussion leader, respondents completed the test form. Then, respondents presented their reactions to the form and responded to questions. A person fluent in Spanish was present at each of the Los Angeles interviews to interpret for Spanish speaking respondents whose fluency in English was limited or nonexistent.

Each session was audio tape recorded after informing the participants and obtaining their consent. One purpose of taping was to avoid the disruptive effects on the flow of the interview from note taking by the discussion leader. In addition, taping ensured that all comments by the participants were recorded; this facilitated detailed analysis of the data. The tapes are also quite useful for later training purposes regarding group process.

All but two of the group interview sessions were led by Dr. Bayton. The author conducted the other groups (i.e., Glen Burnie, Md. and Los Angeles, Ca. teenagers).

Observers were present at each interview session--depending on who was conducting the session, Dr. Bayton or the author, the other observed. Several sessions were also observed by Thomas B. Jabine. This involvement by research principals permitted many useful changes to be made early on to the interview structure and content. In addition, many interview sessions were attended by SSA staff from both SSA headquarters and field offices (i.e., depending on the location of the interview). Their "eyewitness" reports were important in understanding the problems which result when administrative forms are actually used by the public.

Each interview session was conducted by the discussion leader according to the following procedure: 1. Introduction--purpose of the project--to get public reaction and feedback. 2. Warm-up Questions: (a) Why should a person apply for a social security number? (b) When should a person apply for a social security number? (c) How can a person go about applying for a social security number? (d) What information does Social Security want from applicants? (e) What documents are needed and why? 3. Completion of the Form by Respondents--Respondents filled out the new form as though they were applying for a social security number. Respondents were requested not to interrupt for questions or comments, but to wait until the entire group had finished completing the forms. 4. Open-Ended Inquiry--This was based on questions or comments initiated by participants. 5. Directed, Item-by-Item Inquiry--The discussion leader then systematically probed respondents' reactions to other questions on the form, instructions, and the components of the race/ethnic question, i.e., (a) Privacy Act notifier "For Statistical Purposes Only," (b) race/Hispanic origin label, (c) race/Hispanic origin item content, and (d) other issues relating to content and format.

RESULTS

Presentation of findings will be limited to those pertaining to the race/ethnic questions on the form, except to note that participants seldom appeared to read the accompanying instructions. This finding has implications for item design and content which will be described later in the paper. In general, respondents showed considerable interest in and reaction to the race/Hispanic origin question. Reactions to the race/ethnic questions were generally the first spontaneous questions raised after the forms were completed. Selected respondent comments obtained during this phase of the interview included the following: "What do they mean by origin--Spanish or Hispanic?" "America begins from the North Pole to the South Pole. We are all Americans, and not just the Alaskans and Indians." "How come they only have American Indian/Alaskan Native and Asian/Pacific Islander? There are more Mexican Americans than them." "If you are Mexican American, what would you check in 3b (Origin)?" "Why do they put just Spanish or Hispanic? It's like discrimination; they don't ask Chinese, Japanese, or Filipino." "Are you supposed to check something in the a part and the b part?" "I think it is kind of confusing because if you are a Spanish-speaking person you could put Black or White or whatever. But why is it important for them to know whether you are Spanish in order to get a card?"

In addition to the spontaneous questions raised by applicants immediately after the forms were completed, the direct inquiry phase of the interview provided another phase of respondent reaction. Some of the reactions obtained during this part of the interview included the following: "Where are Mexican-Americans?" "They should have an 'Other' group." "Suppose he's French, where would he go?" "Could American Indian be interpreted as South or Central American Indian?" "For statistical purposes only--means you don't have to fill it in!" "For statistical purposes only means it's not important!" "What's the difference between race and origin?" "How come race and origin are separated?" "Origin means where your parents were born." "Origin is the language you speak." "What's the difference between Hispanic and Spanish origin?"

Summary of Results and Implications for Redesign of the Form for Further Testing

The results of the interviews may be summarized as follows: 1. The term "For Statistical Purposes Only" was frequently misinterpreted to mean "agency use only" and the race/ethnic item subsequently omitted. A better means of notifying applicants of the voluntary character of the question would need to be employed; 2. The listing of subgroups included in certain major race/ethnic categories should be included on the form proper (p. 3) as applicants seldom read the instructions elaborating the subgroups contained on the last page (p. 4) of the application package. The inclusion and choice of Hispanic identifiers might be especially critical; 3. The "singling-out" of Hispanics (or probably any other group for that matter) in a separate question was resented, for different reasons, by both Hispanics and non-Hispanics; 4. The two-

question approach as tested appeared confusing to many applicants who felt that they had responded sufficiently to the first question regarding "race." The use of separate questions as tested, especially the Hispanic origin question, appeared redundant or sinister to many applicants; and 5. The label "origin" was not well understood, nor was the term "Spanish or Hispanic origin," (some persons thought that "Spanish" and "Hispanic" must mean different things as they were both asked).

These results suggested that major changes in the format of the race/ethnic question and accompanying instructions would need to be made and tested under controlled conditions in an operational setting, to improve accuracy and completeness of reporting by applicants and to estimate population response rates for actual operating conditions. Although there were intimations that a two-question approach might produce response problems (cf. results described under 3 and 4 above), it was felt that a two-question approach could be devised which might overcome these difficulties. Innovations in the design of a revised two-question approach might produce benefits resulting from comparability with SSA's and the Bureau of Census' data which provided separate counts for race and ethnic responses. A two-question approach would also permit cross classification of Hispanics into racial groups.

As described above, a one-question approach was also suggested by the results of the focus group interviews. However, in that it had yet to be tested, there was a need to construct and test such an approach under actual operating conditions (i.e., with actual applicants in SSA district offices). Further, it was determined that exploration and comparison of different methods for informing applicants about the voluntary nature and statistical uses of race/ethnic data would also be desirable.

Use of Focus Group Findings in the Revision of Race/Ethnic Questions for Use in Operational Pre-Tests

The focus group findings then were used to construct alternative question formats (i.e., one vs. two-question approaches), change item labeling and content (such as the inclusion of identifiers for Hispanics and Asians) and revise instructions regarding the race/ethnic questions. These alternatives were later explored with OMB and OFSPS and approved for operational testing (6). The specific changes were as follows:

Privacy Act Notification Statement: "For Statistical Purposes Only"

This phrase was dropped because of its ambiguity and negative instructional effect. Instead, it was decided to test the effect of the word "voluntary" on the form itself versus a test version without "voluntary" on the form. Both versions would also contain an instruction facing the form, which would explain the voluntary nature of the race/ethnic question and describe the main uses of the data. The word "voluntary" would be placed directly adjacent to the item label (and before the on-form instruction, "check one only") to assure that it was noticed.

Item Labels

Race/Ethnic Origin

The race label in the revised two-question approach was retained--in part to permit historical continuity with SSA's current color or race label and secondly, to distinguish this item from the "ethnicity" question.

Rather than asking about ethnic origin or descent as had proved troublesome in the focus group study, it was decided to test the use of the question, "Are you?" This would be followed by individual race/ethnic categories.

An "Other (specify)" race category was created for use in the two-question approach to permit flexibility and also to permit classification of respondents who checked "Other" for the race question and "None of these" for the ethnic item.

Identifiers

The focus group findings strongly suggested that on-form examples of subgroups were desirable, especially for Hispanics and Asian/Pacific Islanders. The basic design principle was to use specific identifiers which were likely to increase overall response in the category (e.g., the use of the terms "Chicano" and Mexican" in the Hispanic category).

Item Structure

The American Indian or Alaskan Native category was changed to North American Indian or Alaskan Native to avoid confusion and incorrect response by South American Indians or Hispanics. The category "Hispanic" was placed before White and Black (or Negro) to increase likelihood of obtaining the Hispanic response, which took precedence over the race responses. This was also accomplished by re-labeling the Black category to "Negro or Black". These steps provided primacy for the Hispanic response within an alphabetical structure for arrangement of race and ethnic categories.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Focus group interviews were conducted with groups of White, Black and Hispanic simulated SSN applicants. Results from these interviews were useful in detecting weaknesses in all elements of a proposed race/ethnic question, i.e., format, content, and instructional material. Potentially severe response problems which would have appeared in operational results, were avoided by this particular form of pre-test. The application form was then revised for controlled testing of specific alternatives with larger samples of actual applicants under operating conditions (6). The utility of the focus group interview as a vital part of the pre-test process and the overall testing program was demonstrated, particularly its use in determining why people respond the way they do to administrative and statistical forms. In addition to its use in instrument design, the focus group has other potentially important uses in surveys and experiments--such as determining type and content of experimental treatments and reasons for their success or failure. Much wider use of the focus group technique is recommended by the statistical and research community; however, due

to the vagaries of group process, it must be cautioned that the most useful results will be obtained by skilled, rather than by novice, practitioners.

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Appendix 1

Race question from "old" SSN Application Form

Your color or race

White	Negro	Other
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix 2

Race /Ethnic origin question from proposed new SSN Application Form used in focal group testing
For Statistical Purposes Only

a. Race

b. Origin

<input type="checkbox"/> White	<input type="checkbox"/> American Indian/ Alaskan Native	Are you of Spanish or Hispanic origin?
<input type="checkbox"/> Black	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian/Pacific Islander	
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

Note: Due to limitations of space it is not possible to include all four pages of the SSN application package which were tested in the focus group study. Copies of the form may be obtained by writing the author:

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