

DISCUSSION

Norman M. Bradburn, NORC, University of Chicago

It is refreshing to participate in a session devoted to an important but too often neglected area of survey research. The organizers of this session are to be congratulated for putting together such interesting papers. I am particularly pleased to see that these papers will become part of a publication that should be of great utility to those in government who are charged with the task of developing questionnaires for a variety of studies. I have great hopes that these efforts will impress on researchers and--perhaps more importantly--sponsors of research just how time-consuming proper questionnaire development is and how necessary it is to devote enough resources to that part of the survey process.

Let me turn now to the individual presentations for some brief comments.

First, in the paper on unstructured interviews by Sue Rustemeyer Streett, I particularly liked the idea of coding each day's interviews and feeding the results back to interviewers to guide the next day's interviews. My only question is the practical one--can it really be done on a daily basis? Nevertheless, it is certainly a practice that is in the right direction, even if it is not practical to do it every day. The paper also quite rightly stresses the iterative nature of questionnaire development. One could also use the technique for established topics to set new ideas about how topics are viewed.

One potential danger to keep in mind: with a small number of respondents one unusual event or respondent experience may seem more important than it turns out to be in the full survey. One needs some way of estimating the probable distribution of answers, so that one is not overwhelmed by a particularly interesting but rare event.

The second paper, by Dawn Nelson, on informal testing shows us the importance of informal pre-testing, pointing out the advantages and problems. One problem that I would add from our experience at NORC is that using the "best" interviewers in the pretest can sometimes give you quite misleading data on the average length of the interviews when they are fielded, because the "best" interviewers also tend to be more efficient and take less time per interview. This may be a particular problem if one of the main goals of the pretest is to get an estimate of the length of the questionnaire.

Also, if you cut out a lot of questions on the basis of the pretest in order to shorten the questionnaire, don't forget to pretest it again--you will probably not have cut out as much as you thought you did.

It is also important to stress that questionnaire designers should know how to interview and do some of the pretest interviews themselves--or at a minimum go with interviewers and observe. Debriefing the interviewers is no substitute for direct observations.

I would also warn against overreliance on sites near headquarters. You may get very biased results--particularly if headquarters is Washington. It is also very important to leave time in the schedule to incorporate feedback

into questionnaire construction. Informal pretests are well worth the investment of time and money to improve the data collected and to reduce respondent burden.

The third paper, "Learning from Interviewers," by Terry DeMaio, makes the important point that we can learn a lot about the interview from the interviewers, and describes practical ways to accomplish this. She mentions two ways, one the oral debriefing and the other administering the questionnaire with the interviewer as the respondent. One thing I would add to the topics about which interviewers should be asked is the interviewer's understanding of some key terms. For example, in a survey of informal caregivers, the concept of a "standby caregiver" appeared to be misunderstood by a number of respondents. It would have been nice to know whether this was a problem only for the respondent or whether the interviewers were having trouble also.

One important point to keep in mind is that post-interview evaluations are often conducted by staff independently from the research staff. This reduces the probability that results will be incorporated into the study in ways that will improve the survey. It may help the next survey, but not this one. We should not forget that we can get post-interview evaluations from respondents as well as interviewers.

The fourth paper, "Investigating Respondents' Interpretations of Survey Questions," by Streett and Carlson, makes some very important points. In particular, this paper discusses the importance of finding out the respondent's frame of reference for answering questions. While this is most often done during the developmental stages of the survey, it is possible to incorporate questions about the respondent's frame of reference for answering the questions about key concepts into the interview itself. These questions could be asked of all respondents or a subsample. Different definitions of key terms might be incorporated into the analysis.

The fifth paper on using record checks, by Dodge, calls our attention to the ways in which records can be used to improve the validity of surveys. Record checks are expensive and have their own problems (and, of course, are not themselves entirely free from errors), but they do offer an important source of independent information that is often overlooked. Reverse record checks are good for finding out if the questions we are asking are picking up instances of the phenomena that we are interested in. They may be very important in helping us decide whether self-reports are of sufficiently high validity to make it worth doing the study at all.

Overall, these papers discuss a number of important steps in developing questionnaires, and point out many valuable techniques for improving questionnaires. The Subcommittee on Questionnaire Development Approaches is to be congratulated on pulling together all of this material and relevant experience. I hope that it is published soon and given wide circulation both within and without government.