

DISCUSSION

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The ever-present problem of nonresponse has led survey researchers in the last fifty years to find a wide range of remedies. The intent of most of them is to provide a means for the practitioner to either prevent, quantify, or adjust for the problem. Preventive strategies, the predominant theme of this session, seek to increase the likelihood of participation, and thus circumvent the problem by attempting to at least partially eliminate it. The approach to prevention in dealing with survey nonresponse, to borrow an analogy from medicine, has traditionally been to deal with the symptom rather than the root cause, to treat with herbal emulsion based on hear-say and tradition, rather than with medication derived by means of a basic understanding of the process that created the problem. We have seen evidence of many ways in which response rates can be increased, and yet we may wonder why most of these strategies work some of the time, some work most of the time, but none of them work all of the time. The answer is simple. The diversity of the problem of nonresponse is as great as the field of survey research itself, and, perhaps more importantly, we have never fully understood the dynamic of the psycho-social interchange in which the effort to obtain a response takes place.

In different ways each of the excellent papers presented in this session have helped us to better realize the truth of this statement. The Lyberg and Lyberg paper helps us to appreciate the diversity of the nonresponse problem and thereby the elusiveness of the solution. The Groves and Cialdini paper then suggests a fundamental framework for understanding one segment of the problem, and finally the Couper paper subjects a portion of that framework to an empirical test. My remarks are intended to highlight some of the main points for the survey practitioner that I found, and then to mention a few thoughts that I did not see emphasized in the versions of the papers I read.

By displaying the impressive array of research on nonresponse that has been happening at Statistics Sweden, the Lyberg and Lyberg paper enables us to see a great deal of cross-cultural uniformity regarding the nature and implications of nonresponse and to thereby better understand the dynamics of the nonresponse phenomenon in American surveys. For instance, the authors

provide a profile of a heterogeneous "hardcore" of nonrespondents, as well as effects on nonresponse due to the mode of data collection, questionnaire topic, and survey design. We also see familiar indications of the importance of the role of the interviewer in producing reasonable response rates, problems with non-availability during summer vacations, and familiar variables like population density, marital status, and household size showing up as predictors of participation.

I was particularly impressed by the number, size, and frequency of government-sponsored surveys in a country of 8.5 million people. It seemed curious to me that the concept of the "oversurveyed" population, which often comes up as an explanation for the recent upward trend in the rates of nonresponse in this country, was not mentioned as one of the possible reasons for the similar trend in Sweden. The events surrounding the 1970 census and other controversial surveys may provide a plausible explanation for the periodic surges in nonresponse rates, but the long-term upward trend may partially reflect a growing sense of disillusionment with the public saturation of these surveys. Some indication of this possibility comes out of the 1986-1990 data that the authors summarized from a series of surveys on public attitudes toward Statistics Sweden, where over this period of five years there appears to have been a gradual decline in the public's views concerning the importance of the data the government collects in its surveys. A look at this trend over a longer period of time might have provided stronger evidence to test this hypothesis.

From the abundance of methods research, to the public relations kits to aid in giving surveys needed credibility, to the "nonresponse barometer" to gauging on-going public response to surveys (but which, incidentally, might best also reflect the experience of privately conducted surveys as well), one cannot help but to be highly impressed by the devotion of Statistics Sweden to the goal of monitoring, understanding, and thereby being able to effectively deal with nonresponse.

The Groves and Cialdini paper lays before us a thought-provoking and potentially useful framework for explaining why people refuse to participate in face-to-face interview surveys, thus enabling future preventive decision making to begin with an

etiological understanding of the problem, as opposed to using the favorable "home-remedies" that have been traditionally applied. The framework in this paper is significant because it seeks an understanding of noncooperation from the long-needed connection between the behavioral sciences and survey research.

The framework, if found to be appropriate, is important to the practitioner, because it suggests a major shift in the recruitment, training, and supervision of field interviewers. Its major novelty is its emphasis on a custom-fitted (or "tailoring") approach to solicitation, in which the concept of the verbatim introductory script is abandoned in favor of the notion of making solicitation requests that vary by known or perceived respondent attributes. It implies the need to hire interviewers who possess or attract high-compliance profiles and then to spend more time training them to keep conversations going long enough during solicitation so that they can recognize the appropriate solicitation approach and successfully implement it. It also implies the need to find practical ways to accurately read the respondent's cues so that the interviewer can formulate an effective strategy, but this may not be easy. (Who know, perhaps the concept of a "tailorized approximation" will take on a whole new meaning.)

By focusing on refusals, the Groves and Cialdini framework clearly addresses for most surveys the most important component of nonresponse in terms of relative size and contribution to the overall effect of nonresponse. There were, however, a few factors and components affecting the decision to cooperate that might have been added to those posited (in Figure 2). For instance, the number of allowable call attempts, which surely affects overall response rates, may also influence the likelihood of cooperation as well, since with each additional allowable attempt a portion of those in the "noncontacted" and "other" categories will become refusals. It might therefore have been viewed as a factor under the "survey design" or "respondent-interviewer interaction" rubric. The difficult-to-gauge concept of commitment to the immediate survey and to survey research in general might also have been included as a factor tied to the interviewer, although perhaps this could be viewed as a part of "affective state." Also, I did not fully understand the authors' decision to exclude the "environment" from the list of factors linked to the respondent. Apparently it was because they view the environment as those attributes that are

somewhat removed from the respondent (e.g., level of crime in the neighborhood, household size, etc.). I would suggest, however, that "environment" could also be seen as the circumstances surrounding the respondent at the time of the call attempt, which could precipitate noncooperation (e.g., a crying baby, an unexpected phone call, or meal preparation in process). Finally, the gatekeeper phenomenon seems to be absent in this framework, although it might have been considered jointly with the respondent. For the elderly not living alone and some married individuals with possessive or protective spouses, it is especially significant since, if involved in making the cooperation decision, this ancillary individual may play a decisive role.

The decision by the authors to limit their view to refusals in face-to-face interview surveys was admittedly a necessary one, since consolidation of all sources of nonresponse would have meant trying to combine clearly different frameworks. However, the importance of expansion to nonrefusals cannot be overlooked in subsequent research, since the majority of present-day surveys are done in relatively short timeframes and with smaller operating budgets, where rates of nonresponse and the proportion of nonrefusals will be relatively high. A shift to noncontacts for face-to-face interview surveys, for instance, might include "respondent" factors like mobility (unintentional nonavailability), elusiveness (intentional nonavailability), time pressures, and employment schedule, while for the "interviewer," factors like persistence, creativity, experience, and demographic attributes might be used.

Finally, the paper by Couper builds from a portion of the Groves and Cialdini framework to provide us with an interesting and useful assessment of the role of interviewer attributes as they impact on the overall success in obtaining a response in face-to-face interview surveys. The findings confirm expectations concerning the importance of interviewer experience (as measured by the length of tenure with the Census Bureau) confirm our expectations about the effect of assignment area features and surveys (with varying response rates), but are somewhat disappointing on other factors tied to interviewer expectations and behavior.

The implications from this research for the practitioner are clear. When hiring an interviewer, try to find one who has previously worked for you or someone else with a similar interviewing philosophy; and then when you have them on

board, train them broadly and do whatever you can to keep them. Also, length of tenure, as it was properly measured to reflect experience in this study, must be couched in terms of time spent in applying the same approach to interview solicitation, since experience with incompatible philosophies may not only be irrelevant but counterproductive.

Especially surprising to me was the relative predictive weakness of the "tailoring" variable, which unlike some of the other behavioral factors, seemed to be a pretty solid measure. Perhaps, despite their astonishingly high response rates (97 percent and 93 percent for a Statistics Sweden survey) interviewers are less than truthful about their application of persuasion technique or maybe the measure fails to gauge their ability to apply the tailoring concept. The possibility of weak interviewer expectations and behavior measures, as noted by the author, seemed to be the main cause of the relatively weak showing of these traits in the model. Research on the role of these factors should continue, but it may require that measures for these factors be constructed from a composite score of related questionnaire items, as was done for the "tailoring" variable in this study.

I also found interesting and possibly relevant the author's remark that "essentially the same" prediction patterns, as presented in the paper for the three surveys combined, were found for the

regression models when the data were separated by survey. I assumed this to mean that the sets of coefficients were similar, but I wondered if the predictive strengths of the survey-specific models were similar as well. This issue may be of some relevance since the three surveys had varying mixes of refusals among nonrespondents and the models suggested in the paper were those aimed at the refusal component of nonresponse. Thus I would have expected one set of coefficients and relatively strong predictive strength in the model using the CES data, where nearly all of the nonresponse is due to refusals, and another set of coefficients and weaker predictive strength in the models for the other two surveys, where nonrespondents were about evenly divided between refusals and nonrefusals. Similar findings for the survey-specific models might possibly obviate the author's expressed concern about using the overall response rate as the dependent variable in a model intended to understand refusals.

In conclusion, then, we see illustrated in these three informative papers substantial and productive effort which serves to improve our understanding of nonresponse. I congratulate the authors for their fine work, but I would be less than honest if I did not hasten to add that I have come away humbled by the realization that there is still so very much that I do not fully understand about this important survey problem.