

# CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF JOB SEARCH: FURTHER EVIDENCE FROM VERBATIM RESPONSES

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**Key Words:** proxy responding, vignettes, unemployment rate, Current Population Survey

In a research program that started during my tenure as an ASA/NSF/BLS Senior Research Fellow during academic year 1988-1989, I have been investigating possible artifacts in the measured unemployment rates for youths 16 to 24 years of age. (Rates for this age group are often three or more times as high as rates for adults.)

Unemployment rates are estimated from the Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly survey of some 60,000 household locations carried out by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. According to CPS rules, an individual who did not work during the reference week is classified as unemployed if s/he was available for work during that week had it been offered, and had actively searched for work during the previous four weeks. (Non-working individuals who fail these tests are classified as not in the labor force unless they are on layoff with expectation of recall in the near future.) It is the final requirement, active job search, that may be a source of artifactual difference between unemployment rates for youths and adults. If youths conceptualize job search differently than adults do, then they may well be differentially likely to report themselves as actively looking for work and hence differentially likely to be classified as unemployed.

But the situation is somewhat more complicated than the above description suggests. Proxy reporting is permitted in the CPS, with a single household respondent reporting for all members of the household.

Indeed, a large majority of youths are reported for by proxies, most often their parents. Thus, if youths and adults conceptualize job search differently, adults who report by proxy for youths may report on the youths' job search differently than the youths would have reported for themselves, had they self reported. Hence youths reported for by proxy may be differentially likely to be classified as unemployed compared to youths reporting for themselves or compared to how they would have been classified had they reported for themselves.

In a series of presentations (e.g., Tanur and Shin, 1990a; 1990b; 1990c; Tanur, 1992; Tanur and Lee, 1992; Tanur, Shin, and Lee 1991a; 1991b; 1992; 1993a; 1993b), my colleagues and I have explored this thesis, finding that unemployment rates differ between self- and proxy-reporting youths, and some limited support for differential conceptualizations of job search between youths and adults. In the current paper we examine conceptualizations of job search directly.

## METHODS

As part of the research program resulting in the redesign of the questionnaire for the CPS, the Census Bureau carried out a CATI/RDD study testing revisions of the questionnaire against the then-current version. In the debriefing phase of these experimental interviews, all respondents in the outgoing rotation group who had reported themselves or

another member of their household as looking for work were presented with a series of vignettes portraying scenarios that might be construed as job search. They were asked to report whether the protagonist in each vignette should be classified as looking for work, and then asked to explain why.

The text of the vignettes appears in Table 1. Note that the introduction to the task and the form of the question asking if the activity constitutes looking for work are different for the standard and experimental versions of the CPS. The vignettes also vary the gender of the protagonist. For purposes of this paper we have collapsed the data over these variations of questionnaire version and gender of protagonist. Note also that reading newspaper ads (vignette 8) and practicing typing (vignette 10) do not constitute job search according to CPS criteria. Talking to friends and relatives about job openings (vignette 9) and filling out applications (vignette 11) do constitute job search according to CPS criteria. Earlier

analysis of the responses to the vignette data (Tanur, 1992) showed that youths were more sensitive to small changes in wording of the vignettes than were adults. After the respondents had indicated whether the activity constituted job search, they were asked why they had made that classification and their responses were recorded verbatim. The current paper carries out a content analysis of these verbatim responses to determine whether adults and youths differentially appeal to the CPS requirement of active job search to justify their classification of activities as job search or not.

Table 2 presents some examples of statements that were coded as reflecting the concept of active job search. Key words that were taken to embody that concept included "active," "effort," "just," "at least," "only," "take the trouble," "initiative," "honestly looking," and "attempt."

Table 1. Vignettes

- Standard CPS:** Earlier I asked you if ... has been looking for work. In these next examples, please tell me whether or not you would report the person as looking for work.
- Experimental CPS:** Earlier I asked you if ... has done anything to find work. In these next examples, please tell me whether or not you would report the person as doing something to find work.
- V8. George/Terry has been reading newspaper ads. He/she hasn't answered any of the ads because he/she hasn't yet seen any jobs in which he's/she's interested. Would you report him/her as:
- (Standard CPS) - looking for work?  
(Experimental CPS) - doing something to find work?
- V9. Sandy/Keith talked with friends and relatives about job openings. Would you report her/him as:
- (Standard CPS) - looking for work?  
(Experimental CPS) - doing something to find work?
- V10. Tony/Laura has been practicing his/her typing in order to get a job. Would you report him/her as:
- (Standard CPS) - looking for work?  
(Experimental CPS) - doing something to find work?
- V11. Ken/Pam filled out a job application and mailed it in. Would you report him/her as:
- (Standard CPS) - looking for work?  
(Experimental CPS) - doing something to find work?

Table 2. Examples of Use of Concept of Active Job Search

Vignette	Answer
Read Ads	Yes He's putting forth something of an effort
	No Because he was just looking at ads and did not put in any applications
Ask Friends & Relatives	Yes He's trying somewhere, he's not just sitting at home
	No Because he just talked to family and stuff -- you have to go places
Practice Typing	Yes She's making an effort to prepare herself so she can get a job
	No He is not actively trying to find a job with a specific employer
Mail Application	Yes He's done something about it, he's at least trying
	No If he was interested he would go in himself

## RESULTS

Table 3 indicates that the vignettes seem to be ordered by difficulty of correctly judging whether the activity depicted should be considered looking for work. While almost everyone agreed with the CPS definition that mailing in an application constituted job search, only a minority of either age group made the distinction that CPS insists on between merely reading ads on the one hand and placing or answering them on the other. This distinction seemed particularly difficult for youths to make. For the other vignettes, there was little difference between youths and adults in the percent correctly judging which activities ought to constitute job search.

Table 3. Percent Giving "Right" Answer to Job Search Vignettes, by Age

	Youths	Adults
Read Ads <sup>1</sup>	22% (32)	41% (257)
Ask Friends & Relatives <sup>2</sup>	53% (32)	53% (258)
Practice Typing <sup>1</sup>	61% (31)	62% (255)
Mail Application <sup>2</sup>	97% (31)	97% (259)

1. CPS does not consider this job search; correct answer is "no"

2. CPS considers this job search; correct answer is "yes"

Table 4 shows the results of the content analysis. The ordering of difficulty shown in Table 3 is roughly duplicated here, with the exception of the reversal at the "practice typing" vignette. (This reversal is caused by the disallowance of various forms of the reason "s/he's practicing, not looking" as reflecting an active conception of job search.

The disallowance was on the grounds that the reason merely echoed the form of the vignette. When the data are reanalyzed to consider these "practicing" responses to be appeals to the activity concept, the percentage among youths rises to 65% and among adults to 90%.) What is most striking about Table 4, however, is that young people are consistently less likely to appeal to the concept of active job search than are adults, although the differences do not attain statistical significance at conventional levels, primarily because so few youths are household respondents.

Table 4. Percent Appealing to Concept of Active Job Search, by Age

Vignette	Youths	Adults
Read Ads	38% (32)	48% (257)
Ask Friends & Relatives	69% (32)	84% (258)
Practice Typing	42% (31)	60% (255)
Mail Application	87% (31)	90% (259)

Note also that except for the practice typing and mail application vignettes, the percentages in Table 4 are higher than those in Table 3 (and the practice typing vignette shows the same pattern when the "practicing" responses are included). Thus it is clear that individuals can be wrong for the right reasons -- they can use the activity concept but vary (from each other and from CPS definitions) in where they draw the line of "enough" activity to decide that job search has occurred.

Table 5 classifies the appeals to the activity concept by the correctness (according to CPS definition) of classification of the protagonist as looking for work as well as by the age of the respondent. In all of the vignettes those adults giving the correct

response are more likely to appeal to the activity concept than are those adults who give incorrect responses. That same pattern holds for the youths, except for the ask friends and relatives vignette.

Table 5. Percent Appealing to Concept of Active Job Search, by Age and Correctness of Judgment

Vignette	Judgment	Youths	Adults
Read Ads	Correct (No)	43% (7)	76% (107)
	Incorrect (Yes)	36% (25)	29% (150)
Ask Friends & Relatives	Correct (Yes)	47% (17)	85% (147)
	Incorrect (No)	87% (15)	83% (111)
Practice Typing	Correct (No)	63% (19)	61% (158)
	Incorrect (Yes)	17% (12)	40% (97)
Mail Application	Correct (Yes)	90% (30)	90% (251)
	Incorrect (No)	0% (1)	88% (8)

Table 6 looks at the same data from another angle, presenting the percentage giving a "correct" response among those who used and those who failed to use the activity concept. We see that among adults, an appeal to the activity concept usually helps accuracy. With the slight exception of the mail

Table 6. Percent "Correct" Judgment by Age and Appeal to Activity Concept

	Youths		Adults	
	Activity Concept Uses	Doesn't Use	Activity Concept Uses	Doesn't Use
Read Ads	25% (12)	20% (20)	65%* (124)	20%* (133)
Ask Friends	38%* (21)	82%* (11)	58% (217)	54% (41)
Practice Typing	86%* (14)	41%* (17)	71%* (136)	51%* (119)
Mail Applications	100% (27)	75% (4)	95% (133)	96% (25)

\*Statistically significant difference between percent correct among those who appeal and those who do not appeal to the activity concept.

application vignette (which almost everyone correctly identified as job search) adults who invoke the activity concept are more likely to make a correct judgment than those who do not invoke it. But the activity concept badly fails the young people in the ask friends and relatives vignette.

## DISCUSSION

There is a clear difference between youths and adults in the frequency of their appeals to the concept of active job search. Adults appeal to it more. But such appeals do not seem to lead inevitably to more frequent correct classifications of activities as job search or not. Indeed, although the sample sizes are small, we see that youths who use the activity concept are likely to set too high a standard of activity in the ask friends and relatives vignette. The youths' verbatim comments suggested that they saw this as "just talking" rather than serious job search. Hence youth who talk to friends and relatives about job openings and who self report are likely to be incorrectly classified as not in the labor force rather than as unemployed.

How would differences in the use of the active job search concept impact the unemployment rate for young people answered for by proxy? If a parent (the usual proxy) neglected to mention to a CPS interviewer his/her child's job search because the parent did not consider it active enough, the child would be considered out of the labor force rather than unemployed. If the parent is applying the activity concept correctly, all is well and the child is correctly classified. If, however, the parent is applying the concept too rigorously, then there is no follow-up by the interviewer and the child is misclassified.

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