

# USING FOCUS GROUPS WITH RESPONDENTS AND INTERVIEWERS TO EVALUATE THE QUESTIONNAIRE AND INTERVIEWING PROCEDURES AFTER THE SURVEY HAS TAKEN PLACE

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## Introduction

Focus groups can be used at various phases during the survey development process. They are often used to:

- help define and clarify research objectives and data requirements (Fowler, 1995; Gower and Nargundkar, 1991; Morgan, 1997);
- gain an understanding of concepts and issues from the perspective of respondents prior to developing the questionnaire (Statistics Sweden, 1997);
- test questionnaires (including questions and response categories) and data collection procedures (Fowler, 1995; Gower, 1993 and 1994; Gower and Haarsma, 1997; Statistics Sweden 1997);
- evaluate alternative versions of questions and response categories (Gower and Haarsma, 1997; Gower and Nargundkar, 1991);
- obtain respondents' reactions to questionnaires (Statistics Sweden, 1997);
- investigate the wording and vocabulary that respondents use (Statistics Sweden, 1997);
- evaluate the respondent-friendliness of questionnaires (Gower and Dibbs, 1989); and
- discuss respondent relations issues (Statistics Sweden, 1997).

At Statistics Canada, focus groups have been used for all these purposes in the development of household, business, agricultural and institutional surveys (Gower, 1993 and 1994; Gower and Dibbs, 1989; Gower and Nargundkar, 1991; Lawrence and Laffey, 1993).

All the uses of focus groups specified above occur *before* the survey takes place. It seems that focus groups have not been extensively used (in fact, perhaps almost not at all) to evaluate the questionnaire and interviewing procedures *after* the survey has taken place. This type of focus group application can be useful in the ongoing evaluation of continuing or longitudinal surveys where improvements can be made to the instruments and procedures.

This paper describes a research project where focus groups were held *after* the survey had taken place. The study involved ten focus groups with respondents and six focus groups with interviewers who had participated in the 1996 Survey of Family Expenditures (FAMEX) that was conducted by Statistics Canada in early 1997.

The purpose of the FAMEX Survey is to provide information on expenditures for updating the weights of the basket of goods used in the Canadian Consumer Price Index. Due to the requirements of the new Project to Improve Provincial Economic Statistics (PIPES), the FAMEX Survey is undergoing a major redesign. The survey will take place every year beginning in 1998 instead of every four years, and the sample size will be increased. Because the level of detail required by the survey resulted in a very long and demanding interview for respondents (from two or three hours to as many as seven hours) and due to the difficulty of recalling detailed expenditures over a one-year reference period, changes in the collection methodology are being considered (Tremblay and Hale, 1998).

Information for the FAMEX Survey is collected by interviewers who visit the sampled households. From a high of 81% in 1982, the response rate for the FAMEX Survey declined to 77% in 1986 and 74% in 1992. This decline is a concern to Statistics Canada and suggested that the existing data collection procedures should be evaluated. For this reason, and taking into account changes being considered for the redesign of the survey, it was decided that it would be appropriate to use focus groups to consult with respondents and interviewers who had participated in the 1996 FAMEX Survey.

## Objectives of the Focus Groups

The main purpose of the focus groups was to examine the FAMEX questionnaire and interviewing process from the points of view of both the respondents and interviewers, with the aim of improving the questionnaire, the response rate, and data quality in future surveys. More specifically, the goals of the focus groups were to gain an understanding of the interaction between the respondent and the interviewer, to understand more about the role of introductory materials (*i.e.*, what motivates people to respond or to refuse), to assess the FAMEX questionnaire, to collect feedback from interviewers, and to improve interviewer morale.

## Methodology

A total of 16 focus groups with FAMEX respondents and interviewers were conducted in six cities across Canada. Ten focus groups (two in each location) took place with respondents in Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto and Edmonton. Six focus groups (one in each location) took

place with interviewers in Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver. Since Canada has two official languages, it is Statistics Canada's practice to conduct focus groups with both English and French-speaking participants. For this reason, the groups in Montreal were conducted in French, and in English in the other locations. The focus groups were moderated by the authors of this paper (consultants of Statistics Canada's Questionnaire Design Resource Centre). They were held during March and April 1997 after FAMEX interviewing had been completed (*i.e.*, one to three months after respondents had taken part in the survey).

The Questionnaire Design Resource Centre recruited respondents for the focus groups. Respondents who took part in the focus groups each received an honorarium of \$40 (Canadian). The importance of their opinions and the usefulness of their comments and suggestions were emphasized during the recruiting process and at the focus group sessions. Respondents were telephoned to confirm their attendance one or two days prior to the scheduled focus group time. For the interviewer focus groups, the regional offices invited interviewers who had worked on the FAMEX Survey for the first time as well as experienced interviewers who had worked on the survey for many years.

The respondent focus groups each consisted of seven to ten participants, while the interviewer focus groups were smaller. Focus group facilities with one-way mirrors and observation rooms were used in each city except for Edmonton and Toronto where regional office facilities were used for the interviewer focus groups. The focus groups with interviewers took place during the morning or afternoon, while those with respondents took place during the evening.

### **Focus Group Discussion Topics**

Topics that were discussed during the focus groups with respondents included:

- introductory materials (*e.g.*, letter and brochure, reasons for participating in the survey);
- the interviewer (*e.g.*, how the interviewer introduced the survey and carried out the interview);
- the interview (*e.g.*, length of the interview, concerns about privacy and confidentiality, feelings after completing the interview); and
- the questionnaire (*e.g.*, difficult questions, sensitive or embarrassing questions, length of the reference period, recall, use of records, accuracy of responses).

At the end of each focus group, respondents were asked the following questions:

- "What did you consider to be the most burdensome: the length of the interview, intrusive questions, difficult questions, or something else?"

- "We are trying to make our questionnaires at Statistics Canada as easy as possible for respondents to answer (*i.e.*, respondent-friendly). Besides what you may have suggested already, do you have any suggestions about how Statistics Canada can improve the questionnaire to make it easier for respondents to answer?"
- "If you were in charge of the Survey of Family Expenditures, what is the most important change that should be made to improve the survey...or in how Statistics Canada collects the information?"

Topics discussed during the interviewer focus groups included:

- introductory materials (*e.g.*, letter and brochure);
- introducing the survey to respondents (*e.g.*, useful methods to motivate respondents to participate, most common questions that respondents asked about the survey);
- the interview (*e.g.*, length of the interview, interviewing procedures, respondents' feelings after completing the interview);
- the questionnaire (*e.g.*, difficult questions, sensitive or embarrassing questions to ask, questions that respondents did not understand, use of records by respondents); and
- interviewer training (*e.g.*, time spent on training, additional topics for training, interviewers' manual).

Interviewers were asked to discuss the following questions at the end of each focus group:

- "We are trying to make our questionnaires at Statistics Canada as respondent-friendly and as interviewer-friendly as possible. Besides what you may have suggested already, do you have any suggestions about how we can improve the respondent-friendliness and interviewer-friendliness of the FAMEX questionnaire?"
- "Do you have any suggestions or recommendations that will assist interviewers in working on future FAMEX Surveys?"

### **Focus Group Findings**

The highlights of the focus group findings with respondents and interviewers (Gower, 1997) included:

- Introductory materials
  - The introductory letter was useful. It contained essential information about confidentiality and the requirement to participate. Many respondents, however, did not read the letter.
  - Respondents and interviewers recommended that the introductory letter should be simplified in future surveys, and mailed to respondents at least two weeks in advance. The letter should describe the meaningful benefit of participating in the survey, emphasize the confidentiality of the interview, state clearly that an interviewer will be visiting the respondent's home, and provide a 1-800 number to obtain further information about the survey.

- The brochure was effective. Respondents felt that its presentation was attractive and that it contained helpful information.
- In the brochure and/or attachment accompanying the introductory letter, the types of expenditures and the level of detail to be covered by the survey should be outlined (preferably in bullet format).
- The FAMEX brochure should be improved by using more concrete, relevant examples, adding a section on "How the survey will benefit you," and de-emphasizing how businesses will use the survey results.
- Respondents provided the following reasons for participating in the survey: to be a good citizen ("It was my civic duty"), mandatory survey, the interviewer, the letter, and because it was a Statistics Canada survey.
- Introducing the survey to respondents
  - In explaining the importance of the FAMEX survey to respondents, interviewers found that connecting the survey to the Consumer Price Index and the evaluation of social assistance programs was very useful. On the other hand, uses of the survey data in market research studies and to aid labour and management in wage negotiations were less helpful and were viewed negatively by some respondents.
  - Other helpful ways that interviewers found to explain to respondents why they should take part in the survey included: "To compare spending patterns in your region to other parts of the country" and "You will be able to see where you spend money and be able to budget better."
  - Interviewers said that typical questions from respondents included: "Why was I chosen?," "What is the survey about?," "How long is the survey going to take?" and "Do I have to participate?"
- The interviewers
  - The main finding of the focus groups was that the FAMEX interviewers were key to the success of the survey. Respondents in all focus groups praised the professionalism, knowledge, helpfulness and friendliness of the interviewers.
  - Many respondents indicated that they had decided to take part in the survey mainly because of the interviewer.
- The interview
  - Interviewers indicated that most respondents were very cooperative about participating in the survey. As one interviewer said, "Once I got into the survey, people got more excited....I found most people really enjoyed it." Another interviewer commented, "It wasn't so much the questionnaire. It was getting [respondents] over the fact, 'Oh, look at what I have to do for the government this time,' and turning it into a positive experience in that we could smile at each other and have a good time doing it."
- Respondents and interviewers felt that the survey took too long to administer. The average length of interviews was about two or three hours, with a few interviews lasting as long as five to seven hours. In a few cases, interviewers had to visit the respondent's household more than one time.
- Respondents expressed their concern over the accuracy of their responses. At the end of the interview, many were very worried that their answers had not been accurate (due to difficulties in recalling information, estimating certain types of expenditures, and reporting for other household members).
- The questionnaire
  - Parts of the questionnaire that were confusing, misunderstood or difficult for interviewers to ask or respondents to answer were identified (*e.g.*, sections on Mortgage and Loans, Food and Alcohol Expenses, Clothing, Personal Taxes, and Change in Assets).
  - Questions that respondents found sensitive to answer or that interviewers found embarrassing to ask were identified (*e.g.*, questions on assets and investments, personal care products, underwear, foundation garments, condoms, and sanitary products, gifts received from non-household members, and wigs and hairpieces).
  - Parts of the questionnaire that were considered to contain too much detail were identified (*e.g.*, sections on Household Cleaning Supplies, Paper Supplies and Food Wraps, and Clothing).
  - The questionnaire should be shortened and improved by collecting less detail, using plain language, simplifying certain sections, and reducing the long lists of examples.
  - Respondents who were given a copy of the questionnaire to follow during the interview found this very useful. Therefore, in future surveys, it was recommended that respondents should be provided with a copy of the questionnaire.
- Respondents' concerns about accuracy
  - A significant finding was that respondents wanted to provide accurate responses and were very concerned that they were not able to provide accurate information for many expenditures. In the words of one respondent, "We are conscientious, and we want to do a good job. Afterwards, you wonder if you have told Statistics Canada the right things." Another respondent remarked, "I really tried to give the best answers but I am convinced that they do not reflect reality....In thinking about the survey days after the interview, I came to the conclusion that I was far from reality." An interviewer commented, "Most of my respondents wanted to do it accurately and, even though time was an element, they still wanted to give you accurate figures." Another interviewer said, "My respondents

were worried....'This is not accurate...I am not giving you accurate enough information.'...They wanted to do that."

- Interviewer training
  - Generally speaking, interviewers felt that adequate time had been spent on training but recommended that there should be more training about mortgages, assets, and how to handle cases of self-employment, home businesses, and farms. Some interviewers said that they would like to have additional training on respondent relations issues such as the provisions of the Statistics Act, confidentiality, dealing with sensitive issues, and how to ask questions that may be embarrassing for some respondents to answer.
  - Interviewers recommended that training should allow them to complete two or three "mock" interviews in order to get practical experience with administering the FAMEX questionnaire.
  - Interviewers suggested that the interviewers' manual should have an index and/or index tabs to identify the chapters and sections. They also suggested that the manual should include a section on commonly encountered problems as well as a section on frequently asked questions and answers.
- The end of the interview
  - Many respondents, concerned over the inaccuracy of their responses, wondered how the survey results could possibly provide any useful information. One respondent, for example, said, "Now that I've finished, how is that information going to possibly be interpreted in any fashion so that the information is useful to anybody?"
  - Several respondents felt that the survey had provided them with a good summary of their financial situation in 1996, and expressed the view that the survey had been a worthwhile experience for them. Overall, respondents' feelings at the end of the interview were summarized very well by an interviewer who said, "Respondents were glad it was over, most felt good about it, thanked you, also glad they did it. It made them look at their own financial picture. Respondents were surprised at what they had spent in a year [especially on purchases such as restaurant meals, snacks, cigarettes, *etc.*]."
  - Both respondents and interviewers felt that a "thank you" letter would provide an appropriate closure for the interview. A "thank you" letter should let respondents know once again that their participation was greatly appreciated and was important. It could also address respondents' concerns about the accuracy of their responses and provide a reassurance of confidentiality.

- Title of the survey
  - Some respondents who lived by themselves, with non-relatives or in non-traditional families felt that the inclusion of "Family" in the survey's title (*i.e.*, Survey of Family Expenditures) implied that the survey did not concern them. As a result of this finding, the title of the 1997 survey was changed to the "Survey of Household Spending" (Tremblay and Hale, 1998).

### Discussion of Methodological Issues

There are a number of methodological issues concerning the use of focus groups to evaluate the questionnaire and interviewing procedures after the survey has taken place.

One issue is the appropriateness of using focus groups to consult with respondents and interviewers. The use of focus groups to discuss and test questionnaires with respondents has been extensively demonstrated in many previous studies. At Statistics Canada, focus groups have also been used to consult with interviewers when redesigning existing questionnaires (Price Waterhouse Management Consultants, 1991). Moreover, interviewer debriefing sessions – that have many similarities to a focus group – have also been used extensively in the evaluation of survey procedures and instruments. Therefore, it logically follows that focus groups should be a viable and appropriate method for consulting with both respondents and interviewers about the questionnaire and interviewing procedures after a survey has taken place. A literature search has identified that there is at least one other study that documents the successful use of focus groups with interviewers to evaluate the questionnaire after data collection has taken place (Govindasamy and Vaessen, 1997). In that study, interviewers who had administered the 1996 Nepal Family Health Survey were asked to identify the questions that were difficult to ask, difficult for respondents to understand, or embarrassing to answer.

The suitability of using focus groups stems from their strengths (Gower and Haarsma, 1997). Focus groups provide an excellent forum for the generation of ideas and the discussion of issues that prompt new comments, thoughts, and suggestions from participants. They enable the free-flow of comments within a set structure. Suggestions from earlier groups can be introduced in subsequent groups, verifying their merits.

On the other hand, focus groups have weaknesses (Gower and Haarsma, 1997). For example, they do not allow in-depth probing into the specific situation and circumstances of each respondent. Participants who are more vocal, aggressive or outgoing may monopolize the discussion. Participants may change their minds during the focus group because of the influence of other participants. Also, some participants may not feel comfortable expressing

their opinions in the presence of others. Even though focus groups can have one or more of these weaknesses, the focus group moderator can help minimize their impact by being knowledgeable about the group discussion process and the discussion topic, by encouraging open and frank discussion among the participants, and by listening objectively.

The second issue is the length of time between the survey interview and the focus group. In the FAMEX study, some respondents had participated in the survey three or four weeks prior to attending the focus group session; others had participated in the survey as long as two to three months ago. Unfortunately, the data collection procedures and the time required in advance to recruit participants did not allow the time between the interviews and the focus groups to be any shorter. Although there had initially been some concern that one to three months was too long a period of time between the interviews and the focus groups, it was soon realized that this was not a major problem. While they forgot some things over this period of time, it was remarkable how readily most respondents were able to remember the interview experience. Significant things that had happened during the interview were still easy to recall. In fact, discussing the various issues with others at the focus groups helped many respondents think back to the interview and remember what had happened. On numerous occasions during the focus groups, respondents discussed issues in detail with very accurate recall of specific experiences.

The third issue is the recruitment of respondents for the focus groups. Recruiting is always a challenging and difficult but crucial step in organizing focus groups. In this study, there was concern whether respondents (who had already taken part in a lengthy interview) would be interested in taking more time to attend a focus group. During recruiting, the importance of consulting with respondents to get their feedback and opinions about the survey was emphasized. The recruiter telephoned approximately 510 respondents in order to arrange the participation of 90 respondents who eventually took part in the focus groups. Of the 510 telephone calls, approximately 200 respondents could not be reached (there was no answer in 105 cases, a message was left in 85 cases, and the telephone number was no longer in service in 10 cases). Of the approximately 310 contacts that were made, 100 respondents agreed to participate in the focus groups while 210 refused. The primary reasons for refusing to participate (60% of the refusals) were that people were not interested, had no comments to provide, were too elderly to attend, would be away on vacation or business travel, and worked during the evenings. Other reasons for refusing included: prior commitments, too busy to attend, health problems, too far to travel to the focus group location, no babysitter, *etc.* Interestingly, two respondents did not remember having participated in the survey. Respondents

who agreed to take part were very willing and eager to attend the focus groups. Approximately 90% of those who agreed to participate actually attended.

Since a significant number of survey respondents refused to participate or could not be contacted, the fourth issue is whether or not participants in the respondent focus groups were representative of the survey population. Were non-participants' opinions and reactions to the survey different from those who took part? The answer is probably "yes," but the impact of not having them take part will never be known. However, this was not a concern since participating respondents provided useful information from a very broad perspective of situations and experiences.

It should be emphasized that focus groups are a qualitative research method, and that findings and conclusions were not representative of all FAMEX respondents and interviewers. Nevertheless, for the purposes of evaluating the questionnaire and interviewing procedures, it was sufficient to get a comprehensive picture of the range of participants' ideas and opinions. Even the comment of one focus group participant can be a significant finding. Consulting with respondents and interviewers through focus groups produced valuable information that otherwise would not have been known. The focus group findings provided important insights into respondents' and interviewers' reactions to the FAMEX Survey, and indicated improvements that should be made to the survey to maximize the response rate and to improve the accuracy of data collection.

Finally, the fifth issue is the sequencing of the respondent and interviewer focus groups. In most cities, the interviewer focus group took place between the two respondent focus groups. Respondents' comments in the first group provided useful background information before the interviewer focus group took place regarding the interviewing procedures and specific situations that may have occurred. Conducting the remaining respondent focus group after the interviewer focus group allowed relevant issues to be introduced and discussed that may have been identified by the interviewers. It was found that this sequencing of the focus groups proved very effective and provided a better understanding of respondents' and interviewers' comments.

## **Conclusion**

The study described in this paper demonstrates the appropriateness and usefulness of conducting focus groups to evaluate the questionnaire and interviewing procedures after the survey has taken place. Valuable information was ascertained through the discussions with both respondents and interviewers about their experiences in participating in the FAMEX Survey. Respondents described their reactions to the introductory materials and questionnaire, and provided comments about the interviewers, response burden, and

the accuracy of their responses. Interviewers discussed their experiences in administering the survey, and provided constructive suggestions about how the questionnaire and interviewing procedures could be improved. New ideas and recommendations resulting from the focus groups have led to improvements in the re-designed Survey of Household Spending.

In addition to the findings on the questionnaire and interviewing procedures, the focus groups provided a forum to consult with interviewers and to listen to their suggestions and recommendations. Interviewers were eager to participate and were more than willing to share their experiences and ideas about how the FAMEX Survey could be improved. This provided interviewers with the feeling that their opinions and ideas are important. Respondents also appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback about the survey, and felt that it was an excellent opportunity to express their points of view to Statistics Canada.

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