DISCUSSION

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All three of the papers presented in this session exemplify the growing methodological sophistication in the areas of social surveys and interviewing. We are moving away from rule of thumb design of interviews and away from the naive assumption that an answer entered in a designated spot on a printed (or multilithed or mimeographed) schedule represents the literal and exact "truth".

The paper by Kish and Slater differs in approach from those of Lansing and of Barlow, Wirick and Morgan. The latter 2 papers are attempts to isolate factors contributing to respondent and interviewer variance while the paper by Kish and Slater concentrates on measuring the overall effect of interviewer variance. The measurement of overall effect of response error is essential to any decision regarding the amount of research effort it is wise to put into the investigation and control of response error. If an expenditure of \$10 per interview will yield results subject to negligible response error, it would be unwise to spend an additional \$10 per interview to measure the response error or to reduce it still further.

Both Kish and Slater and Lansing have discussed the question of the direction to be taken by further research in the field of response error. On this point, I agree strongly with Dr. Lansing's emphasis on the importance of basing research on some specific theory of response error. Dr. Lansing cites in support of this view the great variety of experimental techniques which can be considered and the fact that, in the absence of a response error theory, we must resort to hunches and "common sense" to guide our selection among the numerous possibilities. Dr. Lansing's position is even more cogent in view of the difficulties and cost of work in this field.

On the side of "difficulties" we have an excellent illustration in the paper by Barlow, Wirick and Morgan. The technique they use is that of "record check". I had considerable acquaintance with record checks in connection with the evaluation of the quality of the U. S. 1950 Census of Population. It is a very intriguing technique and one which the Census Bureau is using extensively in connection with its 1960 evaluation program. Yet record checks frequently involve the expenditure of much time and effort merely to end up with the conclusion that we can find no record corresponding to the datum we are trying to check. In some few cases absence of a verifying record is (at least presumptive) evidence of an error in our data. More often, absence of a verifying record proves nothing about the truth or falsity of the datum we are trying to check. Failure to find my birth certificate in the file for the place and year in which I claim to have been born certainly doesn't prove that I wasn't born and isn't even very good evidence of an error in the reported date or place of birth. Many of us have, I am sure, had ample acquaintance with errors and misfilings of birth certificates and other records. In the study of Barlow, Wirick and Morgan, for example, the "unverified" (i.e., unlocated) cases are, in most instances, more numerous than those cases where a record was located which indicated a possible error in the respondent's report.

On the side of expense of response error investigation, it must be noted that adequate measurement of interviewer error may require a rather large number of interviewers. This is very strikingly illustrated by the data in the paper by Kish and Slater. While the studies they report involved a substantial number of respondents (462 and 489), they involve relatively few interviewers (20 and 9). One of the points emphasized by the authors is the "happy ending" that the effects of interviewer variance are less for means of subclasses than for the entire sample and these effects seem to disappear completely from the comparisons of subclasses. In fact, examination of Kish and Slater's values of roh disclose 3 negative rohs reported for the subclass means (one of these is - .025) and eight negative rohs for the comparisons of subclass means. While it is possible for the population values to be negative, it is more likely that the estimates are subject to large mean square errors.

In any event it should be noted that the "happy ending" of Kish and Slater is subject to certain reservations. Of the 8 negative rohs for differences between subclass means, 6 correspond to situations where neglecting the interviewer effect in estimating the variance of the difference will result in overestimating by 30% or more. The effect on research conclusions of 6 overestimates of variances may be as serious as the effect of 6 underestimates.