

THE OLDER PERSON AS A SURVEY RESPONDENT

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Replies to the queries of a survey interviewer are not always factual--even when the respondent intends them to be. Such error may arise from multiple sources--from personality, from differential group membership, from reaction to an interviewer, from the influence of social status, etc. Allowing for such bias is a difficult task of uncertain outcome. It can be eased when systematic knowledge is available of the probable response of different categories of people to the interviewing situation itself. In the course of preparing to study a sample of older people for 10 years, and simultaneously to cope with their changing characteristics, a library search was made for information on aging effects which might have implications for the interview process. The results, which I am going to present to you, are a small store of apparently relevant facts and a few general hypotheses which are candidates for refinement and testing.

Three aspects of aging have clear implications for performance in a survey interview situation: (1) changes in psycho-physical abilities; (2) changes in response style; and (3) changes in the nature of values and motivation.

Most people are at least impressionistically aware of the psycho-physical changes brought about by aging. General visual acuity usually begins to decline at between 40 and 50 years of age. Among these 65 and over, 40 percent of the men and 60 percent of women have 20/70 acuity or less. 1/ In addition to this general decrease in optical acuteness, some more qualitative decrements set in. Judgment of dimension and direction is less accurate. Depth perception, judgment of line length, and assessment of verticality are less dependable than among the young. 2/ Discernment of embedded, incomplete, or ambiguous forms decreases. 3/ Increasing age, for most people, means marked loss in hearing, especially in ability to hear higher tones. Ability to discriminate speech also deteriorates. 4/ Decrement in this particular ability is of obvious importance in an interview situation. There is a loss with age of some sensorimotor coordination. 5/ Longer time is required to interpret, integrate, and act upon complex sets of stimuli.

The oldster's faltering memory is a byword. Considerable evidence supports it as objective fact. 6/ Both for memory over a short period of time and for long term recall the elderly are noticeably poorer performers than the young. Where the task of remembering is complicated (e.g., by using complex material, by introducing distractions, etc.) the difference is even more notable.

Some of the research on age related IQ change is equivocal. Nevertheless, it does seem clear that after about age 60, overall performance on IQ tests declines. 7/ Various attributes to loss of sensory acuity, lowered response speed, and declining health--however caused, the change is a significant one for the interviewing process.

These losses are probably important sources of some age-related changes in individual response style. One notes his own increasing slowness, his dulling memory, his lessening ability to control the environment--and one tries out and probably adopts different techniques of responding to that environment. The most immediate shift is to decreased self-confidence. Older people consistently produce more negative, belittling self-concepts, than do middle-aged and younger respondents. 8/ Knowledge of one's increasing vulnerability probably brings about the typical caution and restraint of the elderly, and their more rigid approach to most situations.

The evidence for these age changes makes clear their relevance in the survey situation. The cautious, even wary, approach of the older person to a new situation--or to one requiring a decision--is a piece of popular lore which is well supported by research. Performance studies have several times shown older persons more willing to sacrifice speed for accuracy, and more likely to suppress natural responses. 9/ In other research, older people are found to respond more cautiously to hypothetical high risk, high reward situations. 10/ Underlying this increased caution is the suggestion of a generally more serious and deliberate attitude. 11/ They are less impulsive and more inclined to deliberate before making a decision. They indulge in more reviewing and mulling over of answers. 12/

In both attitudinal and behavioral research, the greater rigidity of oldsters is clear. They are more dogmatic, less susceptible to pressure for the change of an attitude, and more likely to show sequential response patterns. They change less readily from one problem solving situation to another and perceive ambiguities less readily. 13/

Whatever the evidence on "disengagement"--and it seems to be inconsistent--it does seem clear that the quality of social involvement changes with age. And it does change in the direction of more detachment. Older people focus more upon themselves and their own emotions. Age, in general, is likely to mean more self-centeredness and less emotional responsiveness to the rest of the world. 14/

A natural outcome of physical and psychological aging is a shift in the hierarchy of personal values. The 60-year old has, consciously or not, done considerable testing of himself and the world around him--on both material and nonmaterial levels. He very likely has weighed his own experience of reality against what is socially held to be true and valuable. And he often comes to conclusions different from those of younger, inexperienced persons. Generally, it may be said that advanced age brings with it different personality needs and different topics of concern.

There are changes in three important need areas--need for achievement, need for power, need for affiliation. Older people are considerably less interested in culturally defined "achievement" than are the young. 15/ Interest in job promotion, for example, is lower. Conversely, the need for power over other people climbs slightly. 16/ Interest in extensive social interaction drops off.

There are marked shifts, with age, in degrees of interest or concern for certain topics, health and physiological concerns, financial matters, the topic of death (particularly one's own), and religion and morality. While generally conscious of physical well-being 17/ older people are more interested in their own health than are the young and middle-aged. They do more thinking about it as well as more talking with relatives and friends. Expectably enough, they also report more concern with physiological functioning. 18/ Financial matters are less worrisome to most older people. They think less often about their own financial situations, report less worry on that score, and are less likely to think they would be happier with more money. 19/ For most people, advancing age brings with it more conscious thinking about death. 20/ The prevailing attitude is not fearful, but rather accepting and un-tragic. 21/ Interest in religion seems to increase with age, 22/ as does evaluation of morality as a desirable characteristic. 23/

The more obvious hypotheses which might be based upon these known differentials between younger and older persons are proved out in existing reports. For example, several points would lead one to expect what is actually the case--that older people are more reluctant survey respondents. Their lowered persuasibility, lessened susceptibility to social pressure, and greater self-centeredness would make them tougher targets for any interviewer. In addition, the older person who is conscious of faltering memory and declining mental ability can be expected to shy away from questioning by strangers, especially when his answers are recorded. It is not surprising, then, that they are reported both to require more coaxing to grant interviews and to refuse more often. 24/ Similarly, they are less cooperative respondents to mail questionnaires. 25/

Failing memory and lowered ability to concentrate would logically make for less consistency from an initial interview to a later one, on the part of the aged. And indeed that seems to be the case as appears in at least one report. 26/ It would be interesting to do a study of this sort with the added element of either reminding or not reminding respondents of their earlier answers. The age-borne tendency to rigidity and to maintenance of attitudes should lead to greater consistency where older people can recall or be reminded of their previous statements.

The supposed "disengagement" of the aged has been suggested as a source of two types of respondent behavior. Whether or not disengagement is the best explanation, Gergen and Back 27/ have reported that older people tend to give more "no opinion" responses as well as more extreme responses--both events supposedly the result of resistance to interviewer attempts to cajole more refined answers from their sample members.

On the basis of the characteristics of the aged which have been summarized here, three additional general hypotheses may be proposed: (1) other things being equal, older people will require more time for an interview; (2) they will respond differentially to several interview topics; (3) they will react differently to interviewer characteristics.

Longer interview time should result from several things. Oldsters are more reluctant respondents and more time is probably used in persuading them to answer problem questions. Their nervous and intellectual reflexes are slower, they are more cautious and deliberate in decision making, so they require more time to select answers. Consciousness of failing memory and mental ability will also retard the speed of answers.

Changed interests and values should make for greater cooperation, on some topics, from older than from younger persons. They could be expected, for example, to respond more fully, and give more refined answers, to questioning on health matters. They will probably be more cooperative and straight forward in answering questions on their own income. Similarly, they will be more interested and responsive to topics relating to religion. Changing values will give different emotional tones to many specific topics--thereby differentiating older from younger respondents. For example, oldsters could be expected to be more detached in the reporting of their own occupational successes and failures--or in speculating about things related to death.

Several age-related changes make it reasonable to hypothesize that some interviewer characteristics will differentially affect older respondents. They should be more responsive to interviewers who are able to be fairly neutral stimulants, thereby offering the least occasion for any kind of a distracting power struggle between interviewer and respondent. There is likely to be a great difference in the quality of answers given to interviewers who speak distinctly and who are able--or permitted--to use explanatory transitions from one topic to another--more so than with younger people. They will probably be more cooperative with detached--and less with friendlier--interviewers than will younger people.

And so on. I have given you a far from exhaustive list of the effects of aging which may be important in conducting surveys and interpreting data there from. Plus a few examples of ways in which it seems the interview process might be affected.

FOOTNOTES

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