

RESPONDENT DEBRIEFINGS OF MAIL SURVEYS: REAL PEOPLE IN THE REAL WORLD

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Background

In the practice of survey methodology, it is always difficult to find out exactly how respondents deal with a mail survey. With in-person or phone interviews, it is possible to debrief interviewers in order to understand some of the problems with the survey. In mail studies, however, often the only information we gather is from idiosyncratic comments written by respondents. One way to gain more insight on how respondents complete mail surveys is to debrief respondents and ask them questions about their experience with the survey. Debriefing respondents to a mail survey allows us to obtain first-hand information about how respondents deal with a survey under real-world conditions. This paper will discuss the use of a respondent debriefing in a multi-mode (mail and phone) survey.

Method

The respondent debriefing took place in the context of a survey of cancer patients with a data collection protocol involving a mail survey, followed by an effort to interview non-responders by phone. Respondent debriefings were conducted during the pre-test of the survey project. The pre-test sample consisted of colorectal and breast cancer patients sampled from hospitals in California and Texas. Debriefing respondents were chosen from pre-test early-responders (respondents who returned the survey approximately 2 to 4 weeks after the first mailing). Early-responders were chosen in order to obtain quick feedback about our questionnaire, and to minimize problems with recall.

Our interviewer was given names and phone numbers of 20 respondents who had been among the first to return their surveys (11 breast cancer and 9 colorectal cancer patients). The interviewer also had photocopies of the respondents' actual questionnaires, so she could see how each respondent answered particular questions, and remind respondents how they answered if necessary. She was instructed to proceed through the list until she had completed 10 interviews, and to try to get a balanced sample of breast and colorectal cancer respondents.

Our debriefing questionnaire consisted of 6 questions for breast cancer respondents and 5 for colorectal cancer respondents. The questionnaire was designed to take only about 10 minutes to complete. Our questions asked about the experience of the questionnaire in general, and about a few particular items. The interviewer was encouraged to probe answers on her own to make sure she understood the issues. In addition to the questions that were asked of everyone, our interviewer was told to read any notes that the respondents wrote in the booklets and ask about those.

Our debriefing questions revolved around *three main points*. First, we were interested in how respondents dealt with the *complexity of the packet*. The survey mailing included a large packet of material including the survey instrument, a cover letter, a brochure, two copies of a medical records release consent form, a form for the respondent to list their doctors, and a form for someone to complete if the respondent was ill, deceased or did not speak English. Second, we were interested in how respondents reacted to the *consent form* and the prospect of having their

medical records reviewed. Third, we had questions about how respondents answered *particular items*. For example, one series of items asked about care in the 6 months after they were diagnosed with cancer. Having modified the question after cognitive testing, we wanted to know if 6 months was a meaningful timeframe for people.

Because this was a multi-mode study, the phone interview schedule was being pre-tested at the same time as the mail survey. Thus, our respondent debriefing interviewer and phone interviewers were debriefed at the same time. This was helpful because it allowed us to compare issues in the phone interview with issues in the mail survey. For example, a few of our mail respondents had trouble with an item that asked them to choose one main physician to answer questions about. However, our phone interviewers did not report any problems with this item.

Conclusions

We found the respondent debriefing to be a useful technique to find out how an active mail survey was being processed and understood by *real respondents* under *real-world conditions*. Although major changes were not made to our survey as a result of the debriefing, it was good to know that respondents were able to handle the complex packet and understand the items we were concerned about. With regard to the multi-mode nature of the study, it was also interesting to learn that some of the items that were difficult in our mail survey were not a problem on the phone.

One of the limitations of our debriefing was the *size of our sample*. A larger sample may have provided more robust and detailed information about potential problems. A second limitation was that we contacted only *early-responders*. We know they could handle the packet, because they completed and sent their surveys back immediately. They may also have had fewer problems with potentially confusing items than other respondents. *Recall problems* may also be another limitation. Several weeks had passed between the time the respondents actually completed their surveys and the time when they were debriefed. A couple of our respondents did not even remember completing the questionnaire. Considering the time lapse, it may have been difficult for some respondents to remember exactly what confusion they had, if any, with particular items.

In conclusion, this was a fast, low-cost way to get information from respondents to a mail pre-test that would not have been available in any other way. Although it has limits, it was useful and proved easy to do. In the future, when planning pre-survey evaluation protocols for mail surveys, this simple procedure is an option that deserves consideration.

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