Identifying the Sources of Non-Response Rates in Difficult to Answer Questions

Collecting information on topics that require a certain level of respondent knowledge has been a challenge for survey designers. (**some how say everyone ought to know it but hard to retain facts and know the answer**) For example, the National Longitudinal Surveys (NLS) designers are interested in obtaining information on pension plans. Reports from two of the survey's cohorts indicate low response rates on the pension questions (e.g., an increased number of don't knows).

Three separate studies were conducted to identify the sources of these low response rates. The three sources are as follows: (1) poor question comprehension (2) lack of knowledge because ineligbile respondents answering or (3) difficulties recalling the correct answer. The first source has to deal with the fact that people simply did not understand the intent of the question. The assumption here is that if they did understand it they would answer it correctly. The second source may be due to the fact that the wrong set of people or ineligible respondents are answering the question. The third source has to do with the fact that though people are eligible they simply can not answer the question. I should say that not these sources of information are not mutually exclusive.

Study 1 focused on poor question comprehension as a potential source of non-response. To isolate this source I choose a sample of respondents were pension plan holders. This is because ineligible people may not be able to answer the question due to lack of knowledge. Respondents in Study 1 answered a series of pension questions, each of which was patterned after the original NLS pension questions. After answering each question, respondents received a series of follow-up probes designed to assess their understanding of the question and terminology. Study 1 findings indicate that people had difficulty understanding the intent of the question and technical terms. These findings clearly suggest that question comprehension was a factor in the low response rates.

Study 2 was aimed at finding out whether due to the lack of knowledge of the respondents. That is to say, did those people who answered the question not have a pension plan when they should have. The results indicate that the screener questions did not flag those respondents who just started working and assume that they are eligible for a pension plan when in fact they are not. This result suggests that respondent ineligibility may be a source of low response rates.

Lastly, Study 3, which is currently underway, is designed to test the possibility that this is a difficult topic to answer. To do so, I have eliminated the comprehension issue by re-designing the questions based on feedback. I also eliminated the respondent eligibility issue by only asking pension holders about their plans.