

Training Elderly Respondents: Does It Help?

Patricia M. Gallagher, Floyd J. Fowler, Anthony Roman, Alison Hauser

Background

Survey administration becomes less efficient when respondents are unfamiliar with the role of survey respondent. Subjects who do not know what is expected of them can complicate the interview process by interrupting the interviewer to answer questions before all the response choices have been read or by giving answers that are not the provided response options. The time required to reread items and response choices as well as time spent in training respondents throughout the interview can contribute to increased respondent burden, interview length, and associated administration costs.

During a pretest for a nationwide telephone survey of Medicare beneficiaries, behavior coding of the interviewer/respondent interactions from tape recordings of the pretest interviews revealed more respondent interruptions and inadequate answers than are usually seen in interviews in other populations.

Methods

An experiment to test the efficacy of making a special effort to train respondents at the start of the interview was incorporated into the nationwide survey. The original version of the instrument was used to conduct 100 interviews with a random sample of respondents. The remainder of the interviews (n=500) were conducted using a revised instrument containing explicit instructions about the role of respondent and an initial training question that presented the response options employed for many of the other items that follow.

One hundred of each type of interview were tape recorded and subsequently behavior coded. The outcome variables were the average interview length for each version of the instrument and various behavior coding categories, including numbers of: interruptions; inadequate answers; repeated questions; repeated response choices; and respondent requests for clarification.

Findings

Respondent training proved to be effective at reducing the number of respondent interrupts of interviewers in this group of older respondents. There were, however, no differences in total interview length, response rates, or refusal rates between the two groups.

Discussion

There is great variation in levels of cognitive functioning in the Medicare population. Interviewers reported that while certain respondents benefited greatly from being trained to the respondent role, with other higher functioning respondents the training was not needed and unnecessarily delayed the start of the substantive portion of the interview. This suggests testing a strategy that targets respondent training to those individuals who are most likely to benefit. In a survey setting, interviewers could be asked to rate respondents' performance after the first few questions. A brief training script would be administered to those respondents not meeting a certain threshold. Interviewing strategies aimed at an older population need to be targeted to skill level rather than to a homogenous group.