

Blending Methodologies in Cognitive Interviews and IDIs to Examine Perceptions of Jobs and Work: Advantages and Caveats

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Abstract

Survey researchers frequently employ cognitive interviews to examine and refine questionnaire items prior to their use in the main study of a research project. In Depth Interviews (IDIs) are often used to follow-up on surveys following data collection in order to ask probe questions similar to those used in cognitive interviews with the intent of getting a more thorough look at the differences observed and problems encountered. Both techniques are exploratory in nature and are useful in identifying potential areas of focus for more structured, larger scale work. In the most recent round of the General Social Survey (GSS), we were able to combine these techniques to look at an approach to the wording of questions regarding perceptions of work and jobs. This approach explores differences in earlier studies using current, purposively sampled respondents to study potential drivers of those differences. A version of the “split-ballot” technique from cognitive interviewing was combined with in-depth follow-up probes from IDIs to explore potential differences in perception. The results are discussed in terms of consistency with previous literature and in terms of implications for the combined use of these methodologies. Caveats are also discussed with respect to the analysis, as well as the conclusions and recommendations for further research.

Key Words: Social, Industrial, Cognitive

1. Introduction

Cognitive interviewing is a method that is often used for questionnaire development prior to fielding the questionnaire. Furthermore, similar techniques such as In-depth Interviews (IDIs) share techniques with cognitive interviewing which are used to follow up the fielding of a questionnaire to explore in-depth the thought processes of the respondent. Occasionally, these are used in combination both to refine questions and to understand the respondent’s answers more fully.

As part of the development work in 2017 (Dugoni, 2017) in preparation for the 2018 Round of the General Social Survey (GSS), NORC employed these techniques to assess respondents’ understanding of the wording of questions related to jobs and work, and to make recommendations for the use and interpretation of questions on this topic.

In the 2016 Round of GSS, an experiment was conducted comparing the responses of two groups chosen at random from the GSS sample that year. Group 1 was given the following question, “On the whole how satisfied are you with the work you do – would you say you

are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little satisfied, and very satisfied?” Group 2 received this question, “On the whole how satisfied are you with the job you have – would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little satisfied, and very satisfied?”

The results from the 2016 experiment are shown in the following table:

Table 1:
Satisfaction with “the work you do” vs. “the job you have”

Responses	The Work You Do (SATJOB)	The Job You Have (SATJOBHV)
Very satisfied	49.9%	38.6%
Moderately Satisfied	35.8	43.8
A Little Dissatisfied	9.3	10.5
Very Dissatisfied	3.7	3.3
Don't Know/Missing	1.3	4.0
	1803	306

Based on these results, it seems that thinking about “the work you do” is associated with higher satisfaction than “the job you have.” The 2017 study was conducted to attempt to replicate the findings of the 2016 experiment as well as to probe a bit deeper into the thought process of respondents as they evaluated these different aspects of work.

2. Method

As part of the 2017 round of cognitive interviews, 20 respondents randomly assigned to split ballot groups and given one form of the identical wording from the 2016 experiment (...the work you do... versus ...the job you have...). Respondents in both groups were given paraphrase probes to see what they focused on in each wording alternative.

Respondents in both groups were also asked IDI type probes to explore the reasons underlying their responses regarding satisfaction in each condition and to assess various topics which they may have thought about as they answered the questions.

3. Results and Conclusions

In general, the responses of the participants in the cognitive interviews reflected the observations from the 2016 experiment in that respondents indicated higher satisfaction in condition 1.

Condition 1: Respondents in the ‘Work you do’ condition responded to the probes by talking about things relating to the range of tasks involved in their job. They also related the work they do to the contribution that these tasks made to others, as well as to the perceived value of their work to society. The responses in this group were more related to what Herzberg (1966) called “motivators” whereas those talked about in condition 2 below were more related to “hygiene factors.”

Condition 2: Respondents in the ‘Job you have’ condition responded to the probes by expressing things involving the specific position or title corresponding to their job. Following their probed responses, they were asked to compare this wording to the wording of the other condition (“the work you do”). Respondents in the “job you have” condition reported that they saw the ‘job you have’ wording as more narrow than ‘the work you do.’ Respondents in this condition saw satisfaction as relating more to extrinsic rewards (salary and benefits) supervision, or job titles than to the work itself.

These results seem to indicate that questions related to “job” tend to prompt respondents to think about extrinsic rewards whereas questions about “work” are considered more in terms of things that are intrinsic to the work performed. In this regard, it was interesting to note that a number of the respondents expressed the opinion that satisfaction with work (cf. Wanous & Lawler, 1972) would mean to them that they were performing at an optimal level and that if they said that, it would imply for them that they would be saying there was no need for further improvement. These respondents felt that was inappropriate and that because they felt there was always room for improvement they could never say they were at the highest level of satisfaction.

Future work could explore wording and follow-ups that examine implications for this work related to intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation and ways in which satisfaction in a context like this might be related to a type of “satisficing,” not in the sense of patterns of acquiescent survey response but in terms of the psychological sense of settling for something as “good enough” rather than always striving for improvement.

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