

# Dissertation Defense

## The Effects of Respondent Commitment and Feedback on Response Quality in Online Surveys

**Kristen Cibelli Hibben**

Dissertation Committee: Fred Conrad (Chair), Steve Heeringa, Ting Yan, Jack Fowler

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Answering questions completely, accurately and honestly is not always the top priority for survey respondents. In their pioneering work on survey research methods, Charles Cannell and colleagues at the University of Michigan in the 1970s and 80s demonstrated the promise of directly asking respondents to commit to providing complete and accurate answers. While promising, these studies were conducted decades ago, in interviewer administered modes, with limited measures of data quality. This dissertation consists of two experimental studies investigating the effectiveness of commitment as well as automatic feedback in promoting better data quality in online questionnaires. The first study measures the effect of commitment – “yes” or “no” – in an online labor force survey. The second study measures the effect of asking respondents to commit to engaging in several specific response behaviors that seem likely promote data quality, such as reading the questions carefully, and trying to be as precise as possible, in an online survey of parents about their child’s health and healthcare. The second study also examines the effect of providing feedback in response to behaviors that are associated with reduced data quality such as speeding, reporting an incomplete date, and leaving open-ended response fields blank. Both studies verify the accuracy of certain self-reported responses using administrative records, in contrast to the indirect quality measures used in earlier evaluations of commitment.

Both studies produced mixed results for the overall effect of commitment. However, in Study 1 there were some promising results for those who committed versus those who were invited to commit but did not, and in Study 2 for those who committed to all of the requested response behaviors versus those who committed to engage in only a few. Study 2 also found significant effects for feedback in reducing unwanted respondent behaviors and evidence of improved data quality. Overall, the results offer insights into the underlying level of motivation of web survey respondents, such as their willingness to look up information in records, and raise challenging practical questions about how such techniques might be used in production surveys.