

Michigan Program in Survey Methodology

Dissertation Defense

Jessica Broome

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368 ISR and 1218 LeFrak

Vocal Characteristics, Speech, and Behavior of Telephone Interviewers

Telephone survey interviewers vary widely in their success at persuading potential respondents to participate in phone surveys. This persuasive act can be viewed in two stages: first, the initial impression the interviewer makes on potential respondents, or telephone “answers”; and, assuming that the contact continues past this stage, the interviewer’s ability to respond concerns expressed by answerers.

I report results from two studies looking at these stages in a corpus of audio-recorded telephone survey introductions, as well as a small study of research practitioners’ opinions on related issues. Initial impressions of telephone interviewers are assessed by asking Web survey respondents to listen to the initial seconds of an interviewer’s recorded introduction (typically “Hello, this is ___ and I’m calling from ___ about our study on ___”) and to rate the interviewer on twelve personal and vocal characteristics, including “professional,” “competent,” “friendly,” and “scripted.” The only characteristic that was predictive of contact-level success was scriptedness, which was negatively associated with success. This finding was in marked contrast to practitioners’ view that the first impression an interviewer gives to a sample member is important to the interviewer’s success, while his or her scriptedness matters little.

Interviewers’ responsiveness to concerns expressed by answerers is assessed through analysis of the entire introduction. These introductions have been transcribed and codes have been assigned indicating the presence of specific concerns (for example, “I don’t have time”), and the interviewer’s response to the concern (for example, “We can call you back at a more convenient time”). Coding also captures “conversation starters” by answerers, including questions addressed to interviewers or any conversation peripheral to the task at hand, and interviewers’ responses to such utterances.

Findings support the hypothesis that interviewers who respond promptly and appropriately to answerers’ concerns and conversation starters have more success in persuading answerers to either participate immediately or defer participation (rather than refuse outright). Responsiveness over the course of the introduction can also make up for an initial perception of an interviewer as overly scripted.

Dissertation Chair: Fred Conrad