

STUDY SERIES
(*Survey Methodology* #2003-06)

**Report on Cognitive Testing of Question to Address
the Respondent Identification Policy**

Theresa DeMaio and Kristen Hughes

Statistical Research Division
U.S. Bureau of the Census
Washington D.C. 20233

Report Issued: June 30, 2003

Disclaimer: This paper reports the results of research and analysis undertaken by Census Bureau staff. It has undergone a Census Bureau review more limited in scope than that given to official Census Bureau publications. This paper is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion of work in progress.

Report on Cognitive Testing of Question to Address the Respondent Identification Policy

Prepared by Theresa J. DeMaio and Kristen A. Hughes
U.S. Census Bureau
Center for Survey Methods Research
February 15, 2001

Background

To address recent increases in privacy concerns, the Census Bureau has developed a Respondent Identification Policy (RIP) guideline for household surveys that use dependent interviewing techniques. This policy requires that interviewers can reveal personal information from a previous interview to a different household member only if the original respondent has given permission to do so.

This policy is in the process of being implemented, and requires the development of a question to elicit the required information. To our knowledge, two different versions of the question have been used in the field to date. The first was included in the 1999 Questionnaire Design Experimental Research Survey (QDERS), which was conducted by telephone in April 1999. The second was included in the American Housing Survey (AHS)-National, and was administered for the first time in 1999. In these surveys, refusal to give permission was in the range of 6-12 percent (Loomis, 1999; Bates, 2000). In the QDERS, a follow-up question, which asked about reasons for respondents' concerns, was asked whenever they declined to give permission. Written entries suggested that some of the "no" answers did not reflect privacy concerns but rather some misinterpretation of the RIP question (Loomis, 1999).

Because of suspected problems with the wording of the RIP question, CSMR staff conducted cognitive research on this issue. The objective was to develop and test new questions that identified only privacy concerns as sources of refusal rather than incorrectly eliciting reports of whether other household members would be able to answer the questions or be available or willing to participate in the survey. This report contains the results of two rounds of testing that we conducted. In the next section, we describe the methodology used to conduct the interviews. Following that, we present the results of the first round of interviewing. Next we present the results of the second round of interviewing. Finally, we present recommendations about the RIP question for the SIPP Methods Panel and other demographic surveys.

Research Methods

Between December, 2000, and February, 2001, CSMR staff conducted a total of 20 cognitive interviews, during two rounds of testing in the Washington DC metropolitan area. All respondents had other household member age 15+, who could potentially respond to the SIPP. We aimed to target respondent characteristics based on two earlier studies done by Loomis (1999) and Bates (2000). Both concluded from their studies that respondents who were unmarried, non-white, female, or over the age of 65 are more likely to decline the RIP request compared to respondents not having these

characteristics. Bates goes on to say that, "of these characteristics, marital status appears to have the strongest relationship with 13.5% objecting compared to only 6.9% of married ones. This might suggest that single unrelated adults sharing a household are less inclined to want previous information revealed."

We recruited respondents through contacts with local community organizations and through personal networks. To contact low-income respondents, we recruited through casual labor recruiters and GED classes. To contact older respondents, we recruited through senior citizen centers. We also specifically targeted housing situations with three or more unrelated roommates.

We interviewed 20 respondents ranging from 22 to 79 years of age. Four of the twenty respondents were over 65 years of age. We interviewed 11 White and 9 Black respondents; 14 females and 6 males. Eleven of the respondents were unmarried. Of the unmarried respondents, 8 were female and 3 were male. Of the females, 6 were non-white, single-headed households.

While this research provides important information about how respondents interpret the RIP question, the voluntary nature of the respondent recruitment process is more likely to secure participation from people who are favorable towards releasing their survey answers than from people who are opposed to releasing their answers. If these two groups have different interpretations of the question as well as different responses to it, the results may not take into account changes that would be required for the "opposers" to fully understand the question. This limitation should be taken into account when assessing the results of this report.

Round 1 Interviews

Two different versions of the RIP question were developed and tested. One was a slightly revised version of the question included in the 1999 QDERS, which took into consideration the open-ended comments made by respondents who declined to share their responses with other household members. The question was worded as follows: "The Census Bureau may call back and talk to someone else in your household to update information. Is it okay with you if we refer back to the answers you gave today?" The second was a new question, which was more forthcoming and direct in its approach to obtaining the information. This question was worded as follows: "Do you care if any other adult in your household knows how you answered? Because the Census Bureau may call back to update this information, and we'd like to be able to refer to the answers you gave today."

Interviewing was conducted in December, 2000 and January, 2001. Ten interviews were conducted by CSMR staff. Three interviews were conducted with Version 1 and 7 interviews were conducted with Version 2. We recruited respondents who spanned a variety of situations, including families vs. unrelated household members, retired vs. working vs. unemployed

persons, low-income vs. high-income persons. Interviews were conducted in northern Virginia, Prince Georges County, and Montgomery County.

Version 1: “The Census Bureau may call back and talk to someone else in your household to update information. Is it okay with you if we refer back to the answers you gave today?”

Two of the three respondents correctly interpreted that the intent of the question was to give answers provided during the interview to other members of the household. However, they thought it was for purposes of verification rather than calling back at a later time to see if there had been any change in status. Both of these respondents answered “yes” to the question. The third respondent thought we were asking for permission to call and talk to another household member (her son in this case), and she would not agree to that. After the purpose and intent of the question was explained to this respondent, she said she would be agreeable to having her answers revealed to her son, but she did not understand this intent from the question as worded.

Version 2: “Do you care if any other adult in your household knows how you answered? Because the Census Bureau may call back to update this information, and we’d like to be able to refer to the answers you gave today.”

This question seemed to work better than Version 1. All but one of the seven respondents to this question understood that it was asking for permission to provide information given during the interview to other household members during a later interview. One respondent thought the recontact was for purposes of verification. All of the respondents said it would be okay to release their information to other household members. This included two respondents who lived in group house situations with unrelated household members.

Respondents were probed about their understanding of the term “adult,” and most thought it included people 18+ or 21+. A few respondents didn’t have a definition in mind and simply thought about the term as it applied to their household situation—for example, their adult children or their spouses. There was some sentiment that if it was meant to include people 15 and older, this should be included in the question.

Revisions

Based on the first round of testing, we decided that Version 2 was superior to Version 1, and dropped Version 1 from further consideration. We felt that Version 2’s wording as tested was misleading to respondents, since they expected that contacting other adults in the household meant contacting people

at least 18 years of age. Rather than adding the “15 years and older” qualifier to the question, we simply changed the question to ask about persons rather than adults. The wording we used for Round 2 was as follows: “Do you care if any other person in your household knows how you answered? Because the Census Bureau may call back to update information, and we’d like to be able to refer to the answers you gave today.”

Round 2 Interviews

Two different versions of the RIP question were tested in Round 2. First, we tested the revised wording of version 2 as described previously. We then decided to test the wording of the RIP question implemented in the American Housing Survey (AHS). This question is different than the others tested in that it is up-front in addressing the longitudinal nature of the survey. It specifies that respondents are contacted every two years for the survey. Minor revisions were made to account for differences between the data collection periods for AHS and SIPP, since SIPP is sponsoring the current research on the RIP question. The wording we used for Round 2 was as follows: “We recontact households over a 2-year period for this survey to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household next time, instead of you, is it OK if we use your answers as a starting point?”

Interviewing was conducted in January and February 2001. Ten interviews were conducted by CSMR staff. Five interviews were conducted with each version. In this round we targeted low-income females heading households and older persons, since these groups had high rates of negative response to the RIP question based on available research. Interviews were conducted in Prince Georges County and Montgomery County.

Version 1: “Do you care if any other person in your household knows how you answered?
Because the Census Bureau may call back to update this information, and we’d like to be able to refer to the answers you gave today.”

Three of the five respondents correctly interpreted that the intent of the question was to give answers provided during the interview to other members of the household. Two of the respondents answered, “No.” However, one of those respondents thought that we would be calling back to verify or check on her answers and not to collect new information. The third respondent answered “Yes,” that she did care if someone knew how she answered. She went on to say, “My daughter might be there, and there are certain things I don’t want my daughter to know, as children. Certain things you gotta keep private...” This respondent clearly understood the intent of the question.

One of the five respondents did not seem to understand that the intent of the question was whether it would be OK if his wife knew how he answered the questions. Instead he thought the question was asking whether his wife could answer the questions if she were interviewed. In one of the interviews,

there was an oversight and the wording of the question was abbreviated to exclude the follow-up sentence. This clearly did not work, because there was no context for why the respondent would care if his/her answers were revealed to another household member.

Version 2: “We re-contact household over a 2-year period to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household next time, instead of you, is it OK if we use your answers as a starting point?”

This question seemed to work better than Version 1. All five of the respondents understood that this question was asking for permission to provide information given during the interview to other household members during a later interview. However, one respondent thought the phrase “starting point” was ambiguous. He said that he didn’t know how we would use it as a starting point. He didn’t know whether we would say, “your husband said...,” or we would say that “someone said... .” Those would be two different things and he said if we said that “somebody said...,” then he would consider it a rumor and he wouldn’t have to pay much attention to it. He would just answer the question the way he wanted to. All of the respondents said it would be okay to release their information to other household members.

Recommendations

While both questions in the second round of testing performed better than the initial QDERS question, Version 2 was understood better than Version 1. For this reason, we recommend its use as the new Respondent Identification Policy question in the SIPP Methods Panel. A slight change needs to be made to correctly specify the field period for the survey. The final question should read as follows:

"We re-contact households over a 3-year period to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household, instead of you, is it OK if we use your answers as a starting point?"

This wording has the flexibility to accommodate its use for surveys with different field periods. Thus, we recommend that it be used for other demographic surveys as well.

References

Bates, Nancy (2000). "Results of the Respondent Identification Policy (RIP) Question in the 1999 American Housing Survey - National Survey," Demographic Surveys Division, Survey Improvement Coordination Staff, U.S. Census Bureau, August 29, 2000.

Loomis, Laura (1999). "Preliminary Results of an Analysis to Examine Respondents' Reactions to the Respondent Identification Policy (RIP)," Statistical Research Division, Center for Survey Methods Research, U.S. Census Bureau, September 8, 1999.