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Current Knowledge and Considerations Regarding Survey Refusals: Executive Summary of the AAPOR Task Force Report on Survey Refusals

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The landscape of survey research has arguably changed more significantly in the past decade than at any other time in its relatively brief history. In that short time, landline telephone ownership has dropped from some 98 percent of all households to less than 60 percent; cell-phone interviewing went from a novelty to a mainstay; address-based designs quickly became an accepted method of sampling the general population; and surveys via Internet panels became ubiquitous in many sectors of social and market research, even as they continue to raise concerns given their lack of random selection.

Among these widespread changes, it is perhaps not surprising that the substantial increase in refusal rates has received comparatively little attention. As we will detail, it was not uncommon for a study conducted 20 years ago to have encountered one refusal for every one or two completed interviews, while today experiencing three or more refusals for every one completed interview is commonplace. This trend has led to several concerns that motivate this Task Force. As refusal rates have increased, refusal bias (as a component of nonresponse bias) is an increased threat to the validity of survey results. Of practical concern are the efficacy and cost implications of enhanced efforts to avert initial refusals and convert refusals that do occur. Finally, though no less significant, are the ethical concerns raised by the possibility that efforts to minimize refusals can be perceived as coercive or harassing potential respondents. Indeed, perhaps the most important goal of this document is to foster greater consideration by the reader of the rights of respondents in survey research.

What Is a Refusal? (Tim Triplett, Chair)

The use of the term “refusal” is broadly used for instances where a potential respondent or someone on behalf of that sampled respondent does not participate in the survey. It includes instances where the person explicitly refuses to participate, or more ambiguous instances of nonparticipation where the person hangs up before they know what the call is about or before eligibility to participate can be determined, or where the person gives a temporary reason for not being able to participate at that time. As such, a refusal is at a conceptual level a psychological aversion—an aversion to participating in a survey at a given time—and may or may not be manifested by overt behavior explicitly indicating that one does not wish to participate. From an operational perspective, in interviewer-administered surveys, researchers (and their staff, e.g., interviewers) often must infer whether respondents are refusing to participate based on ambiguous behavior and categorize such behaviors as “refusals” or not. For example,

potential respondents who do nothing other than hang up on a telephone interviewer might be considered callbacks, or might otherwise be considered refusals, for operational purposes. In other cases (e.g., mail or web surveys), researchers may need to decide whether a failure to respond constitutes a refusal, since most potential respondents to such surveys do not explicitly refuse (e.g., by mailing or e-mailing a response indicating their refusal). In addition, there are two operational types of refusals, interim and final, and the guidelines for categorizing a survey case as a refusal (either interim or final) vary by type of survey, and should be clearly set out in advance by researchers.

For finalizing survey dispositions and for response rate calculations, in surveys without screening criteria (e.g., other than needing to reach a household with at least one adult), any initial refusals that have not later resulted in a completed interview or been found to be ineligible should remain classified as refusals, even if other outcome dispositions (e.g., no answer or a busy signal, in the case of a telephone survey) resulted from subsequent contact attempts. However, in surveys with specific screening criteria, refusals that have not been screened to determine eligibility should not be treated as final refusals, but as instances where eligibility status remains unknown (AAPOR 2011).

Researchers also often distinguish between “hard” and “soft” refusals, though the definitions of these terms vary by organization and within organizations. Certainly, refusals where a potential respondent asks to be “taken off the list,” explicitly says “do not call me again,” or threatens legal action if efforts are made at re-contact should be considered hard refusals and not recontacted. ¹ A refusal that does not meet these criteria, but where a potential respondent becomes perceptibly angry or upset by the request to be interviewed, are likely candidates to be considered hard refusals as well. The definition of soft refusals also varies from organization to organization, but they are often considered to be refusals where respondents give “temporary” reasons for nonparticipation such as being too busy, being uncertain as to the usefulness of participating, or an expressed lack of interest about the survey topic. Some organizations also include hang-ups as soft refusals. How “hard” or “soft” a refusal is lies on a continuum, but individual organizations make determinations of how cases are categorized as “hard” or “soft.” As a practical matter, a hard refusal means that no further contact will be made, whereas a soft refusal may be considered for some type of refusal conversion.

How one defines refusals varies by survey mode, and each mode has its own special considerations when defining refusals. While web surveys and mail surveys encounter refusals, the vast majority of nonrespondents to these modes

1. Survey and opinion research is not covered by the Federal Trade Commission “Do Not Call” rules that govern telemarketing. However, as discussed later in this report, many survey organizations maintain internal do-not-call lists.

simply never respond to the request to be interviewed, so there is little information available to determine whether these cases represent true refusals. In the end, it is not uncommon for web and mail surveys to have dozens, even hundreds or thousands, of cases in which no response is ever received back by the survey organization. Rarely do sampled households explicitly communicate with the study organization that they do not wish to participate. In face-to-face and telephone surveys, however, potential respondents are put “on the spot” and must choose whether to participate or not. In these situations, it is more apparent when a refusal to participate occurs.

Much of this report is “telephone centric” because (1) in interviewer-administered surveys (telephone and in-person) it is easier to identify refusals (in contrast to web and mail surveys); (2) telephone surveys tend to experience higher levels of refusals than other interviewer-administered modes (e.g., inperson interviews); and (3) for these reasons much of the methodological work that has been reported about refusals is based on telephone surveys. However, where appropriate, we cover special considerations for refusals in each mode.

Who Refuses? (John Loft, Chair)

From the perspective of survey error, the principal concern regarding refusals is the possibility that sampled refusers are systematically different on the measures of interest in a particular survey than sampled participants across a range of demographic, attitudinal, and/or behavioral variables, so that their self-exclusion may bias results to a non-negligible extent. From an operational perspective, the concern is to minimize the consequences of refusals on survey costs. From an ethics perspective, distinguishing “refusal” from non-contact or other forms of nonparticipation can be significant in considerations of possible coercive or harassing procedures. Social-psychological theories that may underpin the decision to participate in a particular survey (or even in any survey) include Leverage Salience Theory, Economic Exchange Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

We then detail the substantial increase in survey refusals that repeated cross-sectional studies have witnessed in the past quarter century. Published research, as well as original research conducted by this Task Force, finds that refusals have at least doubled, and in some cases refusals on current studies have seen a three-fold or more increase compared to similar studies conducted a decade or more ago. We also consider the issue of the proclivity to refuse on cell phones compared to landlines.

A substantial focus of the “Who Refuses?” section is the potential for systematic differences by demographics, attitudinal, and behavioral measures. Research on these topics faces a substantial hurdle—if a potential respondent has refused to be interviewed, depending on sample frame and/or study design, demographics or

other attributes of that individual may not be readily available (at least in the absence of nonresponse follow-up studies that have begun to be conducted in the past decade). Researchers have addressed this obstacle to the extent possible by comparing “easy” interviews with interviews obtained only after a significant number of call attempts or by way of a refusal conversion. However, these strategies cannot reveal the attributes of those who refused and never participated.

As to the question of who refuses, we have two general observations. First, there is no shortage of differences found between those who participate at first contact and those who participate only after repeated contacts. Second, while there is some evidence that refusers are more likely to be non-white and score lower on measures of civic engagement compared to participators, there is little consistency in other differences from study to study. Although other findings were not consistent between studies, the fact that every study found multiple significant differences between those who easily participate and those who participate with some initial resistance is reason enough for researchers to be concerned with systematic/differential nonresponse due to refusals and to continue to investigate this topic.

Refusal Aversion (Jeff Stec, Chair)

The section on refusal aversion begins with a review of why researchers might enact procedures to avert refusals. As detailed in the “Who Refuses?” section, there is widespread, if inconsistent, evidence that sampled refusers are systematically different than sampled participators on any number of demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral variables. As such, methods to avoid refusals are done principally to try to reduce the potential for refusal-related bias. Even without strong evidence of systematic bias, researchers may be concerned with avoiding refusals for considerations of face validity, to meet sponsors’ requirements, or to try to reduce effort and costs. While this may seem contradictory, given that most refusal avoidance strategies come with their own costs and effort, it is possible that the cost and labor saved in converting initial refusals to completions is greater than the cost and labor on executing refusal avoidance strategies. In addition, materials and procedures that introduce the survey and explain its features are often of particular interest to research ethics committees (IRBs) and other entities charged with evaluating whether research protocols are respectful of participants’ rights. Refusal aversion strategies are broken down into two main classifications: survey design strategies and interviewer management strategies.

Survey Design

With regard to survey design, we detail seven types of common strategies: survey introductions, persuasive materials, use of multiple contact modes, advance notification, leaving messages about the study, incentives, and rules of contact.

First are survey introductions that are designed to minimize refusals as much as possible. Introductions can occur on the doorstep in in-person surveys, on the telephone in telephone surveys, in cover letters in mail and Internet surveys, or via an advance letter or e-mail. Two key issues with regard to introductions are whether standardized introductions foster fewer refusals than customized introductions and whether an introduction will exacerbate differential refusals, for example, among those not interested in the topic mentioned in the introduction. Also noted and detailed is the importance of an interviewer maintaining the interaction with the sampled respondent, for the longer an interviewer can engage a potential respondent, the more likely they will decide to participate. Similarly, introduction letters or e-mails that capture and hold potential respondents' attention may be more likely to gain participation. In this regard, we review a second technique to avoid refusals: the development and use of survey fallback statements, that is, persuasive, declarative statements or materials that are authored prior to the survey entering the field to address frequently asked questions (FAQs) posed by respondents. A third strategy is the use of multiple modes to reach out to potential respondents. Existing research is inconclusive, but suggests that overcoming resistance may require different modes in contacting reluctant or outright-refusing participants. Fourth, we review the impact of advance notification, and fifth, the impact of leaving study information on the doorstep or in voicemails. A sixth area has to do with incentives, and specifically with whether to offer them at all, whether to offer them on a contingent or non-contingent basis, to whom to offer them, and what amount to offer. Finally, we review decisions one can make regarding rules of contact and repeated contact to each household or business.

Interviewer Management

Another major category of refusal aversion efforts has to do with characteristics and behaviors of interviewers themselves. Research has explored the impact of interviewers' experience, personality, attitudes and expectations, and voice parameters. This section also explores interviewer training and testing, both general and specific. The literature is diverse, but there is clear evidence that experience matters, while effects of personality are more mixed, with no difference across some personality attributes and differences across some others. There is some evidence that interviewers who are open to and effective in utilizing persuasive techniques attain higher response rates than those who are not, though the research in this area has largely been specific to in-person surveys. As to whether specific refusal aversion training is effective, the results are mixed but generally positive.

Refusal Conversions (Emilia Peytcheva and Andy Zukerberg, Co-Chairs)

Of course, researchers are interested in refusal conversions for the same reasons they try to avert refusals in the first place: to minimize the extent of non-response and refusal-related nonresponse bias, to maximize survey face validity, and to potentially reduce cost and effort. Aversion and conversion represent points on a continuum of overcoming hesitance to participate, and the distinction may involve subjective judgment. A concern with refusal conversions is that the reluctant participant may provide lower-quality data compared with data from initially willing participants. This observation leads to concerns of item non-response, lower accuracy, satisficing, attenuation, and less elaborate responses to open-ended survey items. This is a trade-off of error due to refusal-related non-response versus a variety of response errors that may be introduced by reluctant or uncommitted respondents.

Researchers who conduct refusal conversions face a different set of survey design and interviewer management decisions compared to the concerns of refusal aversion. For one, researchers must decide whether to try to convert all or only some of the initial refusals. If only a subset of conversions is attempted (e.g., due to a limited budget), it may be necessary to target select subpopulations for conversion. Researchers also have to keep in mind that it is possible that a significant percent of refusals will be encountered from members of the sampling unit (typically a household) who are not necessarily the person the researcher wishes to interview, because the refusal occurred before within household selection or specific screening criteria were carried out.

Researchers also must consider tracking the outcomes of the conversion attempts, perhaps even deciding to maintain a set of interim and final dispositions for the refusal conversion attempts. Finally, for study design considerations, we discuss the practice of multiple refusal conversions, the practice of attempting to convert households that have already refused not just initially but during conversion attempts as well. As noted in the report, we do not recommend such strategies as part of best practices in survey research.

In addition, there are many study design considerations similar to those reviewed for refusal aversions. These include the use of refusal conversion letters, differences by mode, timing and contact rules, and the use of refusal conversion incentives. There are also similar decision points with regard to interviewer management, such as specific refusal conversion training, and the impact of demographics, vocal characteristics, experiences, and attitudes on the conversion rates of interviewers.

Rights of Respondents (Ron Langley, Chair)

The final main section of the report discusses the rights of respondents. Our intention is that previous sections provide context for this discussion. This section

begins with the observation that considerations of respondent rights in survey research have historically centered on confidentiality and privacy and that more recently, considerations have expanded to include respondent rights with regard to refusing to participate and potential harassment of those who have already refused to participate. This final section also discusses considerations with regard to IRB review protocols related to recruiting survey participants and procedures concerning refusal aversion and conversion. Two recommendations are that we have well-defined rules for what constitutes a “hard” refusal (cases that will not be eligible for re-contact), and that we will try to work with IRBs to develop a mutual understanding of the balance between legitimate survey methodology and respondent rights.

Recommendations

This report provides many considerations, most of which have been briefly touched upon in this Executive Summary. The Task Force developed several recommendations, included in this last section of the report and classified as operational recommendations and suggestions for further research. Operational recommendations are intended to encourage tracking and reporting of refusals as distinct from other types of nonresponse. The distinction is important for several reasons. Ethically and legally, researchers have an obligation to respect the rights of individuals sampled for surveys. Reasonable efforts can and should be made to assure that sampled persons have the information necessary to make an informed choice to participate or not. However, these efforts must be balanced with protections from the potential harassment of repeated contact attempts. Noting refusal as an event and developing indications of whether they are true refusals as opposed to other, more ambiguous forms of nonparticipation is important information for evaluating this trade-off. A second reason for the distinction is to support effective allocation of data-collection resources. Identifying initial refusals from other forms of nonresponse can lead to more focused and more effective follow-up efforts. Finally, the reporting of refusals in survey documentation can form the basis of further inquiry about the effect of refusals on the quality and costs of surveys.

Two themes underlie suggestions for further research. First, several recommendations concern the efficacy of refusal aversion and conversion techniques and are intended to continue to build an empirical basis for best practices in survey design. Second, in the final recommendation, we note the possibility that inclusion of data from initially reluctant respondents may, in some instances, increase total survey error and suggest that it is important to continue to research systematic differences in data collected from cooperative and from reluctant respondents.

References

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