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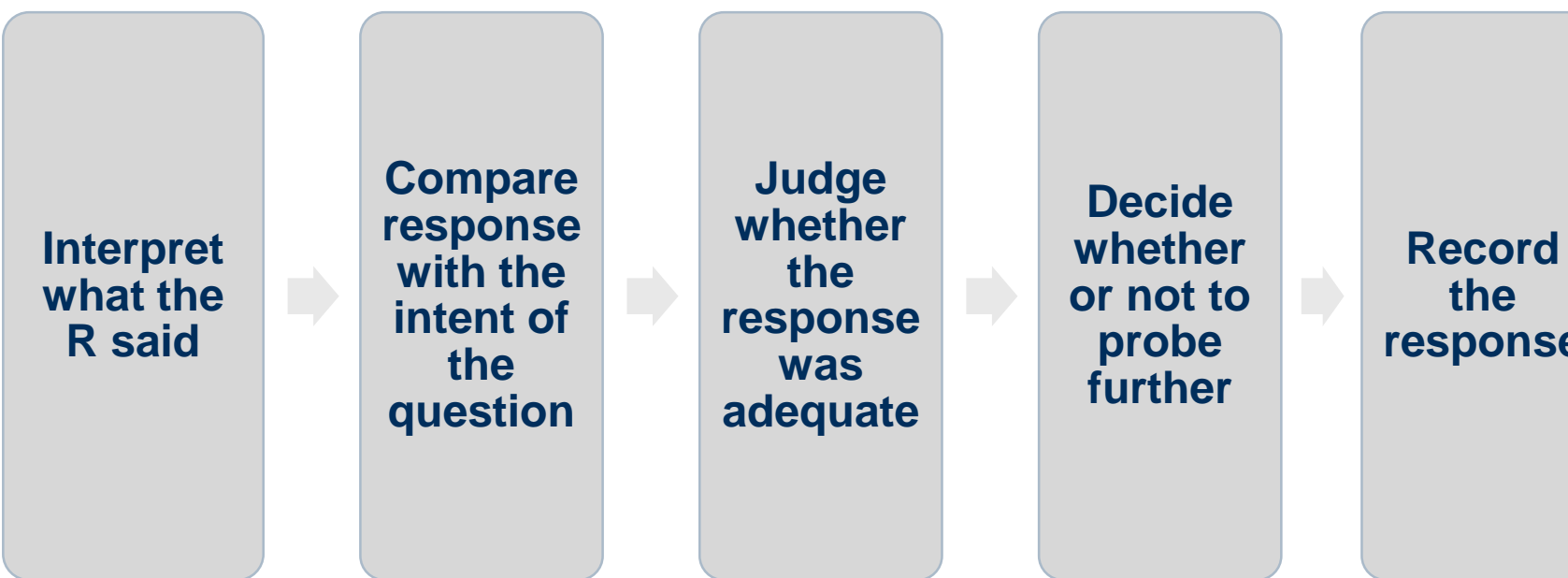
Exploring the Mind of the Interviewer: Findings from Research with Interviewers to Improve the Survey Process

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Background

- The interviewers' (Is) task in the data collection process is a complex one, with many judgments and decisions being made from moment to moment as they ask questions to get answers from respondents (Rs) (Japac, 2008; Ongena & Dijkstra, 2007).
- Is go through this type of process in real-time during the survey interview:



Motivation

- Is behaviors, cognitive processes, and decision-making have not received as much recent attention in the literature as R behaviors.
- Is may be affected by survey features such as question sensitivity/ difficulty, R characteristics, and contextual factors that emerge as the survey interview unfolds.
- Our motivation was to better understand Is' cognitive processes and decision-making during the survey process, and to use this information to help support Is and improve their training.

Research Questions

Sensitive Questions

- How do Is approach asking sensitive questions?
- What questions do Is find sensitive to ask?
- How does question sensitivity affect I probing?

Difficult Questions

- How do Is know when Rs find a question difficult? What leads to question difficulty?
- What questions do Is find difficult to ask?
- How does question difficulty affect probing?

Probing

- How do Is decide whether or not to probe? What cues do Is look for to determine when to probe?

Methodology

- We conducted 27 semi-structured cognitive interviews lasting 60 minutes.
- Participants were Federal interviewers with 1-15 years of experience across multiple surveys (e.g., employment, health, housing, crime, spending).
- Grounded theory approach to identify themes in I behavior across a variety of survey questions and contexts.
- Results were analyzed to develop a framework for I training and future research.
- **Select quotes** from Is are representative of a general response theme or category in the data.

Results

Sensitive Questions for Rs:

- **Topics:** Income, children, disability/health, taxes, demographics
- **“The income question is the most sensitive. [Rs will ask] ‘Do I have to tell you? It’s none of your business, I don’t want to tell you.’”**

I strategies for sensitive questions:

Distancing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I show respondents the [CAPI] screen.” • “I’m required to ask all questions.”
Alter response options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I don’t need to know an amount, just give me a category.”
Emphasize confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Data are confidential and represent many other households.” • “There is a fine of \$250,000 for breaking confidentiality.”
Display empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I understand you might be uncomfortable..”
Apologizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’m sorry I have to ask these questions.”

Sensitive Questions for Is:

- Context plays a role in what makes questions sensitive to ask:
 - **“Asking about sexual orientation and gender identity was recently added to the survey. This is sensitive when asking people from other cultures or countries, or they have religious memorabilia in the house.”**
 - **“Asking about biological/adopted/step-children when maybe the kids are within earshot. Kids may not know they are adopted, stepchildren may be considered their own.”**

Results, continued

Difficult Questions for Rs:

Topics: Detailed household expenses, healthcare insurance deductibles, Medicare/Medicaid payments, estimating rent payment without utilities.

- **“Rs won’t know the deductible, they might just know they spent \$50 at the doctor’s office.”**
- **“Rs don’t know the amount of their Social Security that gets deducted for Medicare. [I have to] explain this question to them.”**

I strategies for difficult questions:

Accept response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’m not always sure what [medical] expenses count or go into what category. Sometimes I am afraid to probe in case I get it wrong.” • “Probing isn’t always worth it. You might get more detail but it is a big ask.”
Consult records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Rs don’t know the exact amount of their utility bills, I have to ask them to look at records.”
Improve recall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I will probe about how they get paid. [Ask them] what is your paycheck amount?” • “I try to probe about seasons, this helps Rs recall.”
Encourage estimation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Rs mostly understand the questions but memory is a bigger issue. I ask for best estimates rather than precise answers.”

Probing:

- Is described how they make the decision to probe or not, which fell into the following categories:

When to probe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A response is inconsistent with a previous answer • The answer does not match a response category • Comprehension/recall problems • Confidentiality concerns • R sensitivity/difficulty • To verify an answer
When not to probe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • R has limited time • R is reluctant to participate or answer a question • Sensitive topics/questions on survey

Vignettes

- We used vignettes to get feedback on situations that depicted realistic survey interactions about employment and program participation.
- Vignettes were a mix of neutral, sensitive, and difficult survey questions and contexts.
- Is rated each vignette for sensitivity or difficulty.

Example from Survey Vignettes on Employment:

Sensitive vignette	Neutral vignette
I: “Are you currently doing any work for pay?” R: “I’m not looking forward to these questions since I lost my job.”	I: “Are you currently doing any work for pay?” R: “Since I just graduated from college with my degree, I’m still looking for a job at the moment.”

I feedback:

- **“I would try to put them at ease and emphasize they [unemployed people] is why the survey is important.”**
- **“I would apologize and say, ‘I understand it’s sensitive, but’... [repeat question.]”**
- **“I would tread lightly here. Need to be careful not to lose the R. I wouldn’t spend too much time probing.”**

- A minority of Is rated the vignettes as less sensitive to be asked or to administer, and would continue to read the questions verbatim.

Example from Survey Vignettes on Program Participation:

“Last year, how much was paid out-of-pocket for your non-prescription healthcare products such as vitamins, allergy and cold medicine, pain relievers, quit smoking aids, AND anything else not yet reported?” *[rated difficult for respondents]*

I feedback:

- **“I have to probe this question when the R says, ‘I don’t spend anything on that.’ Then I ask if they have allergies or take Tylenol and usually the R says yes. You have to help them add up what they spent. I help the R answer with memory probes.”**
- **“Most Rs don’t keep track of this; they start thinking about all they buy, and trying to think of everything that falls under that, how often they buy it. I try to mention the bottle size and see how long it lasts them to figure out how often they buy them.”**

Conclusions

- Learning from Is about what obstacles they face was useful to understand how to develop realistic data collection models, and to help improve training and support for Is.
- Is adapt to Rs in real-time, while maintaining rapport to help complete the interview, but Is do not receive much formal training on these skills.
- This may have led to inconsistencies in how Is handle questions that are sensitive, difficult, or may require additional probing, e.g.:

- Distancing by showing respondents the CAPI screen
- Apologizing for asking certain questions/topics
- Encouraging estimation or recall from memory
- Tailoring question lead-ins
- Shortening questions
- Not probing particular answers

- The use of vignettes added additional depth in understanding how Is make these decisions during the survey process.

Recommendations and Future Directions

Recommendations for I training:

- How to probe sensitive/difficult questions or contexts
- Why questions are included on the survey and how to effectively explain complex concepts to Rs.
- Use standard probes to improve consistency across Is.

Future Research:

- Use CARI recordings to investigate question asking in the field
- Research effectiveness of adding scripted probes into surveys
- Use vignettes to gain insight into I decision-making processes
- Pretest new survey items with interviewers, not just with respondents

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