Video 5 of 6: Respondent (Sensitive Questions)
Asking Sensitive Questions

- Can the information be used in a legal way?
- Is the information personal?
- Does the information relate to the image of the respondent?
Data quality of sensitive items

- “Normal” response error.
  - can occur at each stage of the response process (comprehension, retrieval, formulation, reporting).
  - Function of survey design and topic.

- Error specific to sensitivity of item
  - Special issues related to storage, retrieval and reporting of sensitive behavior.
    - Deliberately misreport
    - Stored erroneously and reported as such.
Sensitive behaviors: social desirability

- Overall desire to avoid stigmatization
- What is desirable?
  - Acceptable behavior
  - Desirable behavior
  - Need for social approval
- Concept of threat
  - Potential judgments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past year</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past 5 years</td>
<td>14.72</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifetime</td>
<td>22.76</td>
<td>6.51</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Different levels of sensitivity

- Question is threatening to ask, regardless of respondent’s answer.
  - E.g., Income
  - Respondents will refuse to answer

- Question is threatening to answer.
  - E.g., Drug use, domestic violence (when others can hear)
  - Respondent may give the wrong answer.
  - Depends on what the actual behavior is.
Asking sensitive questions on the phone

You can’t control the environment the respondent is in, in a phone survey. They can be overheard, answering the questions can make them upset etc.

Examples stress, mental health, sex, domestic violence, etc.

- Avoid questions that need a lot of follow-up questions or explanations (probing).
- Check if people are around the respondent. If so, re-schedule.
Asking sensitive questions: Context matters

- Response format is important
- Set the context of the question
  - Embed question within related set of questions.
  - Best to embed question to communicate behavior is acceptable.
Setting context with prior questions

– Permissive context for undesirable behavior.
– Restrictive context for desirable behavior.

Example:

Q1. In general, would you say that you drink more than your friends, less than your friends, or about the same amount as your friends.

Q2. Think about the friend you know who drinks the most. About how many drinks would you say that person usually has?

Q3. And how about you? On days when you have any alcoholic beverages, about how many drinks do you have?

Sudman and Bradburn, 1982
Deliberate Loading

• Deliberate loading of question
  – Can be used to both reduce over reporting of desirable behavior (voting) and underreporting of undesirable behavior

• “Everybody does it”
  – Even the calmest parents get angry at their children some of the time. Did your children do anything in the past seven days to make you angry?

• Assume behavior and ask about frequencies (presupposition)
  – How many cigarettes do you smoke a day?
  – Danger of insulting those who do not engage in behavior

• Use of authority
  – Wine has recently been shown to reduce cholesterol levels and improve digestion……followed by questions of interest.
Doing something ever vs. right now

- **Undesirable behavior**
  - Recent behavior is most threatening
  - Ask “ever” question before “current behavior”
- **Desirable behavior**
  - More threatening to admit never doing something than to admit within a short time frame or more recently not doing something
  - Tradeoff between social desirability and sufficient observations for rare events

Guidelines for Threatening Questions about Behavior*

1. Use open-ended questions rather than closed questions
   – Middle category seen as typical response (extreme categories = unusual)

2. Use familiar words
   – “having sex” vs. “sexual intercourse”

3. Possibility for informants

4. Starting with lifetime questions may help
   – “Did you ever even once not pay your taxes?”

5. Deliberately load question
   – Presuppose behavior: “When was the last time you ….?”
   – Casual approach: “Do you happen to have …?”

*adapted from Sudman & Bradburn (1982)
END OF VIDEO 5