

Asking Questions About Others to Improve Proxy Reporting

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Background

The Consumer Expenditure Survey is a federal survey that collects information on the buying habits of U.S. consumers. One respondent reports the expenditures of everyone in their household.

Proxy respondents cannot report information they do not have and recall is often flawed even when the respondent is knowledgeable.

Book & Edgar (2012) explored a protocol to reduce the impact of the recall problem. The study findings suggest the protocol was effective but required skilled probing.

Study Goal

Test feasibility of improving proxy reporting by using scripted questions and probes that do not require a high degree of interviewer skill.

Design

The interview was administered using the production CAPI instrument on a laptop, by one interviewer for all participants. Between taking the household roster and beginning the survey, the interviewer asked about these questions regarding others in the household:

- Are there some types of things that [Johnny] spends money on that you don't?
- Thinking about the last three months since February 1st, has [Johnny or Sam] taken any vacations or trips without you?
- Thinking about the last three months since February 1st, has [Johnny or Sam] made any changes to their normal day-to-day routine that might have changed what they did or did not spend money on?
- Thinking about the last three months since May 1st, has [Johnny or Sam] bought anything unusual or out of the ordinary?
- Does [Johnny or Sam] have any hobbies or activities that they like to spend time on?

During the relevant survey sections, the interviewer prompted the participant to remember the expenses indicated by their answers to the questions about others in their household using scripted probes. At the end of the interview, the interviewer asked debriefing questions.

Participants

- n = 25 participants from the Washington, DC area
- Screening criteria: household size of at least two people and having made recent purchases in relevant CE expenditure categories

Results

Length:

The median length of questions protocol was 2 min 40 sec. The maximum length was 7 min 6 sec.

Probes:

Scripted probes did not elicit additional expenditures as expected. Adding customization to the probes improved reporting.

Book & Edgar (2012) Unscripted Probes

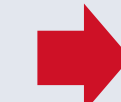
You mentioned that your wife bought some school books; has she done that in the past three months?



10 of 18 participants added reports

Round 1 Generic Scripted Probes

You mentioned that your wife made a change to her day-to-day routine. Are there any other expenses that you want to add related to that?



0 of 11 participants added reports

Round 2 Customized Scripted Probes

You mentioned that your wife started school. Did she have any school-related expenses that we haven't talked about yet?



5 of 14 participants added reports

Added expenditures:

Questions and probes about hobbies had the most impact, with four people reporting additional expenditures after that probe.

	n	\$
Hobbies	4	\$528
Changes to day-to-day routine	1	\$30
Types of things others spend money	1	\$30
Vacations or trips without the participant	0	
Unusual or out-of-the-ordinary purchases	0	

Results (continued)

Usefulness:

Half of participants thought they would have remembered others' expenses even without the protocol questions and probes

	n
Would have remembered	12
Would not have remembered	12

Helpfulness:

Participants who did not report additional expenditures still found the questions helpful. The questions may have cued expenditures before the additional, directed probing.

	n
1 Not at all helpful	0
2	0
3	4
4	5
5 Very helpful	15

Sensitivity:

The difference between self and other ratings suggests that the answers are sensitive -- participants may have offered no sensitive answers but could imagine others revealing personal information.

	Self n	Others n
1 Not at all sensitive	8	5
2	6	2
3	6	8
4	4	6
5 Very sensitive	1	4

Recommendations

Survey designers should weigh the benefits of these protocols against the cost of the additional time needed to ask the questions.

Questions can be asked before the survey and should...

- Prompt the respondent to think about others: the process of thinking about the questions alone may improve recall
- Be broad and universal: respondents will supply the detail needed
- Focus on behaviors: actions may be easiest to remember
- Ask about relevant others only: asking irrelevant questions is awkward and does not provide useful information (e.g. small child)

Probes can be used during the survey and should...

- Be customized: give respondents detail to trigger memory

References

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