

Knock, Knock, Who's There?: Development of Doorstep Messages to Increase Survey Participation in Seven Languages



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Presented at the 73rd annual conference of the
American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)
Denver, Colorado. May 16-19, 2018

*Disclaimer: This presentation is intended to inform people about research and to encourage discussion.
The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.*

Context

- Session about American Community Survey mail materials
- My talk focuses on Decennial Census doorstep messages
 - Similarities in survey universe and non-English languages in which materials provided in the two survey operations
 - Very little non-English content in ACS mail messages
- Other types of messages that a respondent may receive
 - Advertising messages
 - Doorstep messages by interviewers to secure respondent participation
- Cross-cultural and language differences are often overlooked

Literature Review (General)

- Literature on effects of introductory survey messages
 - Focus on interviewer characteristics and behaviors that can be used to gain cooperation
 - Benki et al 2011; Houtkoop-Steenstra van den Bergh 2000; Groves et al 1992
- Identifying issues in doorstep interactions to explain non-response to government surveys (e.g. privacy)
 - Bates et al 2008

Literature (Census Specific)

- Census Bureau has done research over a decade related to doorstep messaging across languages
 - Field observation in eight languages during 2010 census
 - Expert review of translated messages in 7 languages (2015)
 - Focus groups in 7 languages (2015)
- CBAMS work: (Census Barriers Attitudes and Motivations)
 - Identification of different mindsets attached to census respondents from hard to count populations (e.g. language barrier, unawareness, mistrust of the government, low engagement)
 - Williams, Bates, Lotti, & Wroblewski, (2015)

Research Questions

- What messages work best in encouraging census response of non-English speakers in various languages at the doorstep?
- Should the content of messages be tailored for the specific language groups in question and, if so, how?
- Do monolingual and bilingual speakers of these languages understand and interpret messages differently?

Doorstep messages

- Messages: statements for face-to-face interviewer to initiate conversation and gain respondent cooperation at the doorstep
 - Interpretation includes: Tone, appearance, gestures, facial expression
- Types of messages included:
 - Census specific
 - Showing Census ID badge
 - Discuss purpose and frequency of Census
 - Census as mandatory
 - General
 - Introduce self
 - Type of questions on survey
 - Confidentiality and fact that it is safe to participate

Design: Doorstep Messaging Study Focus Groups (January-April 2017)

Language	Number of focus groups	Number of participants	Location
Spanish	6	53	N. Carolina, Illinois, Maryland
Russian	6	59	Illinois, Maryland
Chinese	6	48	California
Korean	6	54	California
Vietnamese	6	51	California
Arabic	6	56	Michigan
English	6	45	Maryland

Methods

- Respondents in focus groups shown four types doorstep interaction videos

	Language Barrier	Unaware	Fear/Mistrust of Government	Low Engagement
Language of conversation	English (interviewer only)	Target language	Target language	Target language
Video scenario	The interviewer does not speak the respondent's language and uses the Language ID card.	The respondent is unaware of the census.	The respondent is afraid of penalties and does not trust what the government says.	The respondent is not interested in participating in the census because (s)he is not engaged.

Focus Group Protocol: Reactions to Videos

- Is there anything you particularly liked about the interviewer?
 - Interviewer messages, tone, appearance, gestures, eye contact?
 - Is there anything you particularly disliked about the interviewer?
 - Was there anything some <target language> speakers might find confusing or difficult to understand?
 - Anything that did not sound natural or was inappropriate for your culture?
 - Would you be willing to participate if you heard these messages?

Focus Group Protocol: General Probes

- Thinking back to all 4 videos, what did the interviewer say that was MOST LIKELY to encourage <target language> speakers to participate?
- What are some reasons that people who speak <language> do not participate in the Census?
- Of the reasons listed, what would be the main concern that would make <ethnicity/language speakers> less likely to participate?

Preferred Messages/Behavior Across Groups

- Appearance: professional, polite, patient, friendly, eye contact and natural speech (not rehearsed)
- Body positioning: distance from door, invitation to enter, not looking inside the home
- Assurance of protecting personal information and privacy
- Burden statement of short amount of time needed to complete the census form
- For all groups but Russian speakers:
 - Benefits of the census data to local and ethnic communities
 - Importance of census participation; use of census data for funding allocation

Concerns across Languages that may Deter Participation

- Immigration status (undocumented immigrants)
- Confidentiality concerns
- Safety concerns (talking to stranger / fear of opening door to a stranger)
- Legitimacy or credibility of the Census interviewer
- Lack of knowledge of the census and its benefits
- Fear of government
- Afraid of losing current benefits
- No substantial benefits for participation
- Language barriers

Differences Across Language Groups: Counting

“The Census needs to count everybody who lives in the U.S.”

- The term “count” was viewed differently across groups
 - Positive:
 - Chinese, Korean: Census needs to “count” everyone
 - *Spanish*: importance of “counting” being connected to benefits to community
 - Negative:
 - Vietnamese: strong aversion to Vietnamese phrase đếm số người (counting people). Association with “communism”
 - Arabic: Suspicion, doubt claim that communities will get fair share of funding
 - Russian: подсчет, пересчет (count) associated with control from government
 - *Spanish*: Concern about gov’t wanting to know how many people at an address

Differences Across Language Groups: Mandatory Message

“Everyone, including you and me, are required by law to participate in the Census.”

- Positive:
 - Chinese, Arabic, Russian: This message is effective and linked to civic duty.
- Negative:
 - Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean: The words used for the legal requirement are perceived as intimidating and limiting people’s freedom of choice.
- Mixed reactions:
 - English: Some participants said message was important. Other participants thought that the respondent is forced to participate and they did not like this.
 - Some participants believed the census should not be mandatory because they doubted whether the census is actually used to improve communities
- Previous English language research: Qualitative v. field tests

Summary and Conclusions

- Importance of qualitative testing with respondents of different backgrounds
- Different messages maybe more effective with different types of respondents
- Very little research on messages across contact modes and types that take cross cultural differences into account

Areas for Future Research

- Tailoring of planned/scripted messages for different language groups
 - Additional analysis of focus group data planned: monolingual v. bilingual
 - More systematic study of optimal content and order of messages across languages
- Development of training for bilingual interviewers
- What is the most effective order of messages at the doorstep for different language groups?
- How to best coordinate doorstep messages with messages for use across modes/operations
 - Advertising
 - Self administered modes: paper, internet
 - Advance letters, brochures, other materials
 - Doorstep messages

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For more information, email: Patricia.L.Goerman@census.gov
Multilingual focus group report: <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/2018/adrm/rsm2018-08.pdf>

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