Qualitative research in the time of coronavirus: Evaluating the quality of cognitive interviews using remote communication modes

(aka, Pandemic! at the Cog Lab)

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Motivation

- Social distancing ≠ in-person interviews
  - Before – ~ Exclusively in-person
  - Now – Microsoft Teams, telephone
- How will shift to remote communications affect cognitive interview results, recommendations for improving surveys?
- Broader interest in evaluating quality of cognitive interviews

Conducting cognitive interviews via remote communications

Advantages

- Geographic diversity
- Save money, time, travel
- Flexibility in scheduling
- Working from home

Disadvantages

- Dependence on technology
  - Interviews
  - Recruiting
- Technological fluency, access
- Demographic diversity?

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Remote Testing Evaluation Project

- Collaboration between Census' three survey testing groups
- Plans:
  - Literature review
  - Develop research questions, research agenda
  - Identify pre-testing projects in which to embed research, and design independent studies

Goals of cognitive interviews

- Examine survey response processes

- Detect potential measurement error

- Problem repair

- Detect usability problems

- Compare alternative questionnaire designs

- Interpret survey results

Overarching questions

- Do results obtained from pretesting differ by testing mode, and if so how?

- How to evaluate cognitive interview quality?

Cognitive interviews in laboratory setting

Interviewer

- Administer survey
- Observe
- Judge quality of verbal reports
- Administer probes as needed
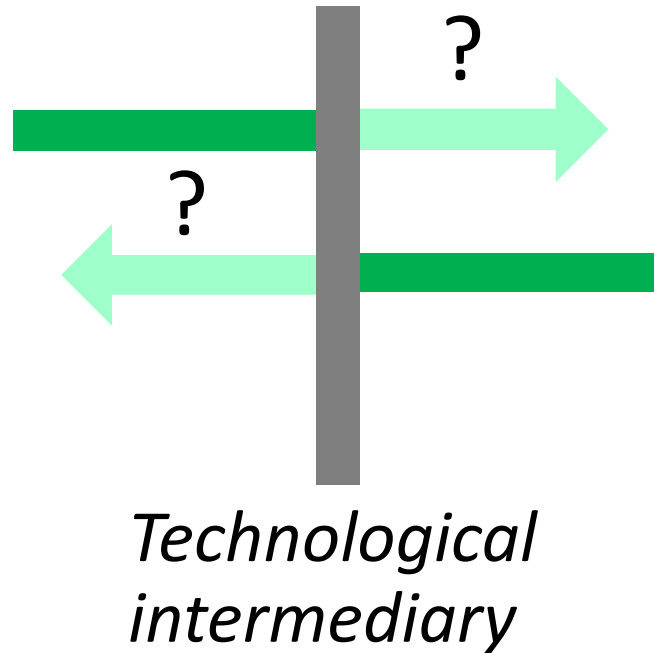- Maintain rapport and engagement

Respondent

- Respond to survey
- Thinkaloud
- Respond to probes

Socially-distanced cognitive interviews

Interviewer

- Administer survey
- Observe
- Judge quality of verbal reports
- Administer probes as needed
- Maintain rapport and engagement
- Troubleshooting

?

?

Technological intermediary

Respondent

- Respond to survey
- Thinkaloud
- Respond to probes
- Use interface
- Distractions in environment

Technological intermediary

- Interface, device, and connection quality

- Computer fluency

- Channel limitations
  - Aural, face-to-face, screen share

- No shared physical space

- R's personal environment

Effects of remote research mode?

- Cognitive interview results

- Interviewer behavior

- Respondent behavior

- Interactions with question(naire) characteristics

- Sample characteristics

Detecting differences in CI results by research mode

- Number, types of problems detected
  - Survey question problem rubrics
    - Q-Bank (Mezetin and Massey 2014)
    - Questionnaire Appraisal System (Willis and Lessler 1999)
    - Classification Coding System (Rothgeb et al. 2007)
- Validity of problems detected
  - Survey data – item nonresponse, edit failures
  - Paradata – response latency, navigational anomalies,
  - Debriefing survey interviewers, analysts
  - Survey help calls

Effects on interviewer behavior

- Interpreting responses and eliciting verbal reports
  - Use of conditional and discretionary probes (Blair and Conrad 2004, 2009)
  - Missed opportunities to probe
- Perception of non-verbal cues
  - Confusion, silence, queries
- Interview management
  - Requests for clarification, rapport maintenance, task instructions, technical troubleshooting
- Resulting bias, reactivity?

Effects on respondent behavior

- Introspection, metacognition
- Verbal reports
  - Volume of verbal output
  - Number and quality of ideas expressed
- Engagement, focus on tasks
- Distractions in R's personal environment

Other differences due to research mode?

- Interactions between question(naire) characteristics and research mode
  - Question type
  - Response tasks
  - Administration tasks
  - Survey mode

Changes in sample characteristics

- Reliance on online advertising, social media for recruitment
  - Web sites, email correspondence, online screening and consent forms
- Demographic diversity
  - Computer access, computer literacy
  - Lower SES, older persons
  - Hard-to-count populations
  - Non-English speakers
- Recruiting, screening and scheduling – volume and outcomes
  - More ineligibles, no-shows?

Methods/analysis

- Question problem coding

- Behavior coding

- Text/thematic analysis

- Cognitive interviewer debriefing

- Participant experience questionnaire

- Split ballot studies that incorporate both in-person and remote interviews

- Validation of cognitive interview findings and recommendations through survey production

Thanks, and please send feedback!

- Literature?

- Research questions?

- Data collection/analysis methods?

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