

Training the Researchers: Eleanor Gerber's Contributions to Cognitive Interviewer Training at the U.S. Census Bureau

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

Introduction: Eleanor Gerber's Background and Work at the Census Bureau

- PhD in Anthropology from University of California-San Diego
 - Dissertation: 1975: "The Cultural Patterning of Emotions in Samoa"
- Anthropology professor at George Mason University, VA; Allegheny College, PA
- Eleanor Gerber worked at the Census Bureau from 1992-2008 as both a research anthropologist and manager
- Overlap: I worked with Eleanor at the Census Bureau from 2004-2008

The Cognitive Interview: Definition from Eleanor Gerber's Training course

- Qualitative method of pretesting questionnaires to identify “nonsampling error” – problems in the response process
- One-on-one interview including observation of person responding and follow up probing to understand how respondents interpret and respond to survey questions
- Techniques:
 - Think aloud
 - Probing

Types of Cognitive Interview Probes

- Concurrent v. retrospective probing
- Process oriented: ask about memory, retrieval, calculation of answers, choice of answer categories
- Meaning oriented: understanding of terms or concepts
 - Paraphrase probes: interpretation of whole question
 - Always ask what something means to the person “in this question”
 - Follow up probes: unscripted: to confirm or seek additional information

Design of Cognitive Interviewer Training

- Conversation with Terry DeMaio about the history
- First cognitive interviewer trainings after the Cognitive Aspects of Survey Methodology (CASM) movement in the 1980s
- Various researchers designed trainings in the early years:
 - Judith Lessler, RTI
 - Terry DeMaio
 - Cleo Redline
 - Eleanor in later years

Key components of the training

- 3-day training
- Day 1 lecture/discussion with slides
 - Introduction, definitions
 - What's wrong with this question? interactive discussions
 - Probing, mode differences, navigation
 - Respondent behaviors
 - Summaries, transcripts and reports
- Day 2/3
 - Protocol, Paired practice
 - Practice interviews

Bringing an anthropological slant to the method

- Emphasis on observation
- Pay attention to respondent as they answer
 - Navigation of forms
 - Response to visual elements
 - Observe behavioral cues to problems
 - Hesitation, Page flipping, Emotional cues
 - Advantage: directly observe and discuss questionnaire problems as they happen
 - Be aware that cognitive interview alters survey behavior:
 - More attentive to task, more cooperative

Sensitivity and Respect for Respondents

- Beautiful writing style
 - Taking the time and care to present respondent's voice and "real words" in context
 - Information was there to be mined and it is the researcher's job to dig it out (Joanne Pascale)
 - Sensitivity, putting self in respondents' shoes
 - Rapport and making respondents feel comfortable
 - Respect and genuine interest in people's perspectives and different circumstances, points of view
 - Bringing anthropological roots and qualitative methods into her federal survey design work

Cognitive Study Interviewee profiles by E. Gerber (profiler)

- Johnny Can't Read
- Helpless Nellie
- The Professor
- Good Time Sal

Cognitive Study Interviewee profiles by E. Gerber (profiler) (continued)

- Agenda Annie
- Lying Larry
- Cognitively Impaired Connie
- Non-Verbal Norman

A Student's Perspective on Eleanor's Training course

- My experience: invited to the training the week before I started my job in 2004
- Very large group, opportunity to meet many people from the office
- Warm welcome to the office
- Great rapport among students and colleagues
- “Lying Larry” practice respondent and knowledge of future boss behind the one-way mirror!
- Enjoyable and collegial vibe

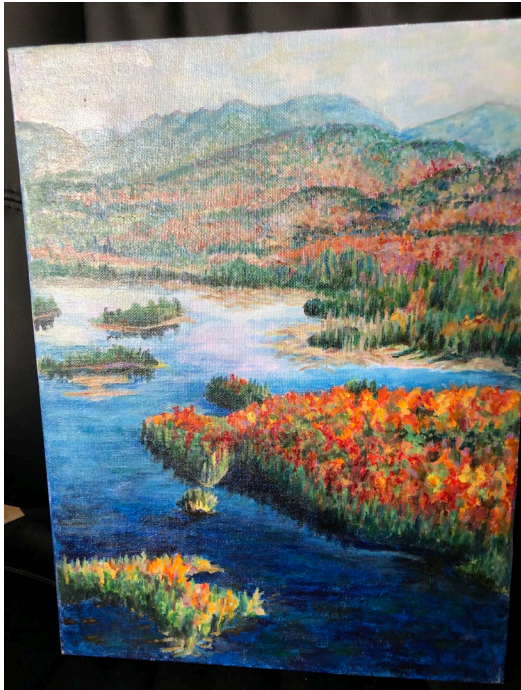
Post Training Mentoring/Feedback

- Focus group room lunches
- Discussion of projects, interviews, how to handle difficult situations
- Brainstorming research ideas
- After retirement
- Advice about leadership, management
- Friendship

Eleanor's Impact on my work

- Research collaboration, sharing ideas, brainstorming
- Leadership style: trusting the people you work with, giving them room to grow and encourage their different specialties
- Enjoy your work and the relationships you are lucky to have through the work.
- Don't take yourself too seriously!

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Thank you!

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