



Survey Burden: an Enabler's Perspective and Guilt Feelings

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Motivation for the Session

An instrument:

- In a third-world country
- On a netbook
- Agriculture / household / finance
- Relentless

Causes of Respondent Burden

1. Multiple sponsorships:

The survey is so expensive that the main sponsor searches for co-sponsors and co-sponsors add questions.

(This is the supply-side rationale.)

Causes of Respondent Burden

2. Relatively few scientifically sampled surveys:

It is so expensive to conduct a general population survey, especially visiting households that researchers search out existing surveys and try to attach questions.

(This is the demand-side rationale.)

Causes of Respondent Burden

3. Fuzzy research objectives, a.k.a. fishing expeditions:

The researcher doesn't have a clue, and so in order to make sure no stone is unturned, just piles on the questions. Highly related to the need to get that dissertation done, complete with some new findings.

Causes of Respondent Burden

4. Optimistic length-of-administration assumptions:

“We have just a few more questions we want to ask!” Junior researchers don't have an idea of how many questions you can ask in a minute (not many).

Causes of Respondent Burden

5. When is a question not a question?

When it is more than one item.

I often have researchers give me "just 2 more questions" but what I really get is question 1 with sub-parts a, b, c, d, and e, then question 2 with sub-parts a, b, c, d, e, f, and g.

Causes of Respondent Burden

6. Let's make sure the respondent gets it right:

This is where the researcher heaps on the edits, or asks the same questions in different ways in different parts of the questionnaire.

“How much do you earn?” Respondent declines. Then the interviewing software branches into ranges of income.

Causes of Respondent Burden

7. Intrinsic subject-matter difficulty:

Some topics are just tough.

If you really want to know what chemicals a respondent has been exposed to in a career, you ask a lot of questions.

Strategies to reduce burden, e.g., placing gate Yes/No questions before sub-sections, lead to respondents learning how to avoid questions.

Causes of Respondent Burden

8. Length of some questions:

Given the ultra-precise way researchers think, I often see overly wrought question statements that take forever to spit out.

Especially on the phone, the respondent can lose track of the meaning. But then to avoid this problem, you get instead, a series of questions.

Causes of Respondent Burden

9. Can't really be answered on the spot:

I once answered a private phone survey on my financial investments. With the jargon they used and the questions they asked, it couldn't really be answered in a 15-minute survey.

To get at all their questions would have required a visit from a financial analyst to help me sort through piles of paper to ascertain what they wanted to know.



Causes of Respondent Burden

10. Multiplicative piling on:

Some surveys have multiple hierarchical or relational entities and through pure multiplicative power, you can get really long questionnaires for some respondents.

Have a lot of family members and/or many plots of land? Boy, are you in for it.

Two Goals in this Session

A. Shared guilt feelings:

In the hope that the specifications shorten.

B. Overcoming burden:

In the hope that the specifications shorten.

Fundamental Questions

1. How do you define burden?

- A. Length?
- B. Number of attempts?
- C. Difficulty?
- D. Privacy?
- E. Survey fatigue?

Possible Solution

Let's go back to paper.

That way the respondent can see what's coming.



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