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Methodological considerations in the use of name generators and interpreters

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ABSTRACT

With data from the Clergy Health Initiative Longitudinal Survey, we look for interviewer effects, differences between web and telephone delivery, and panel conditioning bias in an "important matters" name generator and interpreter, replicated from the U.S. General Social Survey. We find evidence of phone interviewers systematically influencing the number of confidants named, we observe that respondents assigned to the web survey reported a larger number of confidants, and we uncover strong support for panel conditioning. We discuss the possible mechanisms behind these observations and conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of our findings for similar studies.

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1. Introduction

Survey researchers commonly use name generators and interpreters to generate a list of a respondent's closest confidants and their characteristics.¹ The U.S. General Social Survey (GSS) employs a popular approach, which asks respondents to report the names of all those people with whom they discussed important matters in the past six months. Following the name generator item, the GSS proceeds with a series of name interpreter questions, which collects information on the characteristics of the first five people named (Burt, 1984; Marsden, 1987). While the use of name generator items is a common method to collect information about respondent social networks, researchers have uncovered important methodological issues surrounding their use (adams and Moody, 2007; Campbell and Lee, 1991; Ferligoj and Hlebec, 1999; Hammer, 1984; Hlebec and Ferligoj, 2002; Kogovšek, 2006; Kogovšek and Ferligoj, 2005; Kogovšek et al., 2002; Kogovsek and Hlebec, 2009; Manfreda et al., 2004; Marsden, 1993, 2003; Matzat and Snijders, 2010; Van Tilburg, 1998; Zemljič and Hlebec, 2005).

For example, McPherson et al. (2008) discovered that, from 1985 to 2004, the discussion networks of Americans had shrunk

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2014.07.005 0378-8733/© 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved. significantly. This finding was met with skepticism by some (including the study's own authors) and was later revealed to be an artifact of the data collection process (Fischer, 2009; McPherson et al., 2006, 2008; Paik and Sanchagrin, 2013). Several of the interviewers, knowing that for every name given by respondents they would be forced to ask another long series of questions, simply skipped the section and reported the respondent as having no close confidants. Although not all studies have been subject to interviewer-induced error as egregious as this example, other research has shown that these types of questions are particularly prone to "interviewer effects," which refer to the tendency for answers to vary depending on the interviewer assigned to the case (Groves and Magilavy, 1986). These effects stem from the tone and manner in which interviewers ask questions and whether or how they prompt respondents for additional responses (Hox, 1994). Of the several studies that have looked for an interviewer effect on discussant network size, all of them found systematic variation associated with individual interviewers (Fischer, 1982; Marsden, 2003; Paik and Sanchagrin, 2013; Van Tilburg, 1998). The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) in these studies ranged from a low of about 0.10 in the 2010 GSS and the 2005 National Social Life, Health and Aging Project to more than 0.20 in the 2004 GSS, the 1998 GSS, the 1995 Chicago Health and Social Life Survey, and a 1992 study of older adults in the Netherlands (the ICC measures the proportion of variability due to interviewers). The most likely source of this variation is uneven prompting by interviewers (Bearman and Parigi, 2004). Seeking to avoid the added series of questions that comes with each additional name given, some interviewers fail to ask the respondent for any discussants they may have missed, while others follow study protocol and prompt for additional names.





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Abbreviations: UM, United Methodist; GSS, United States General Social Survey; CHI, Clergy Health Initiative; ICC, intraclass correlation coefficient.

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¹ Also note that the terms "discussant" and "confidant" are used interchangeably throughout.

We also know that name generator items are sensitive to their placement within long surveys. When placed near the end of the survey, or after other name-generator or similar questions, people report having fewer close confidants (Paik and Sanchagrin, 2013). There is also evidence from an experimental study on the use of name generators in online surveys that the number of fields available to enter names on a web form affects the number of names generated. From this previous study, researchers discovered that respondents feel pressure to fill in as many of the available boxes on a web form, which leads to larger estimates of overall network size (Manfreda et al., 2004). They also found that small changes in question wording exert a major impact on the number of people named (Bidart and Lavenu, 2005).

Finally, research has demonstrated that so-called "panel conditioning" presents a significant problem in longitudinal surveys that interview respondents at multiple time points (Torche et al., 2012; Warren and Halpern-Manners, 2012). Panel conditioning refers to the bias that emerges when respondents use their previous experience with questions on prior waves of the survey to alter their response. Studies have uncovered several psychological mechanisms governing panel conditioning. First, in some cases respondents use their prior experience with the survey to give answers that they think will help the interviewer. In other situations, the questions answered by respondents spur the respondent to become more knowledgeable about the issues raised. Subsequent to the interview, they become more informed on the subject and change their answers in the next wave of the survey. Finally, respondents may work to reduce the amount of effort they need to expend on the survey. Therefore, panel conditioning is more common on more burdensome questions, when survey waves are spaced relatively close together, and with increasing numbers of survey waves (Kruse et al., 2009; Meurs et al., 1989; Pickery et al., 2001; Presser and Traugott, 1992; Van Der Zouwen and Van Tilburg, 2001). Research has also underscored the importance of separating panel conditioning bias from panel attrition bias, where a group of people with similar characteristics leaves between waves (Das et al., 2011; Kruse et al., 2009; Warren and Halpern-Manners, 2012).

Previous longitudinal research has failed to uncover the presence of panel conditioning on name generator questions. For instance, in one study of older adults, the authors discover that across two waves of a survey, the average network size decreased, the smallest networks became larger, and the largest networks became smaller (Van Der Zouwen and Van Tilburg, 2001). However, the authors conclude that little of this difference is due to panel conditioning, and is, instead, attributable to interviewer effects. Interviewers had access to the respondent's answers at wave 1, and prompted for the same number of respondents at wave 2. Other studies conclude that while the members of an individual's networks change over time, the aggregate properties of networks do not change a great deal (Lubbers et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 1996). There are predictable effects over time on network size from major life events - in particular, getting married, entering and leaving college, and moving (Bidart and Lavenu, 2005).

1.1. Research objectives

In the present study, we analyze data from a panel study of clergy conducted by the Duke Clergy Health Initiative. Below, we describe our focal research objectives.

1.1.1. Interviewer effects in telephone surveys

Because multiple interviewers gathered the telephone data, this research adds to existing knowledge about interviewer effects in the collection of social network characteristics. We measure the interviewer effect in this survey across the seven interviewers and compare it to results from other surveys. We also look for any patterns that might suggest the presence of systematic interviewer effects (Kogovšek, 2006; Kogovšek et al., 2002).

1.1.2. Implementation of name generators in web surveys

Through the random assignment of respondents to telephone interview and web survey conditions, this study allows for the comparison of responses to the name generator and interpreter questions across these two administration modes.

1.1.3. Panel conditioning in name generators

This study is one of the few to implement the GSS "important matters" name generator and interpreter items in a repeated-panel design. This allows us to investigate whether we observe patterns in these data that are consistent with what we would expect under panel conditioning (Torche et al., 2012; Warren and Halpern-Manners, 2012).

2. Data

The data come from the first three waves of the Clergy Health Initiative (CHI) Longitudinal Survey, a longitudinal study of the health of United Methodist (UM) clergy in North Carolina (NC). In 2008, the Duke CHI invited all currently serving UM clergy to participate in the hour-long survey. In the 2008 survey, investigators implemented an experimental comparison of the web survey to the telephone interview. Because web-based surveys offer considerable savings, they implemented this test to see if the web survey could be substituted for the phone interviews in subsequent waves. Investigators randomly assigned two-thirds of respondents to receive the survey via the web, and one-third to receive a telephone interview. To maximize the overall response rate, participants in the web condition could request a paper survey if they did not have reliable Internet access; participants in the telephone condition could also request to complete the survey via web or paper. The 2010 and 2012 waves were conducted only using online surveys (with an option to request a paper survey if Internet access was an issue) and included all of the previously invited participants - even those who had refused participation in the previous wave, retired, moved away, or left the profession. These waves also added any clergy newly meeting the original 2008 study criteria. The new clergy added to the survey were, on average, younger, less experienced in ministry, and slightly more racially diverse than the previously invited participants.

The 2008 survey contains 1726 cases collected by phone, mail, or web and has a 95% response rate. In total, 652 respondents completed phone interviews, 999 web surveys, and 75 mailed in their responses. Seven different interviewers conducted the telephone interviews. Investigators randomly assigned clergy respondents to the telephone condition. The interviewers' ages ranged from 54 to 65 years, and only 1 was male. The 2010 survey contains 1679 cases collected online and 70 by mail with a response rate of 87%. 1513 respondents participated in the survey in both 2008 and 2010, and 241 new cases were added in 2010. The 2012 survey contains 1724 cases collected online and 53 by mail, with a response rate of 81%. Of these, 1328 people participated in all survey waves, 272 people participated in the 2012 wave and either the 2010 or 2008 wave, and a total of 181 new cases were added. 96% of respondents in 2010 and 97% of respondents in 2012 used the web to complete the surveys, with the remainder completing paper surveys.

The CHI Longitudinal Survey replicates the name generator question from the GSS. Specifically, it asks, "From time to time, most people discuss important matters with other people. Looking back over the last 6 months, who are the people with whom you discussed matters important to you?" Respondents can report as many names as they like. If the respondent names less than five Download English Version:

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