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
• 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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