Gender of Interviewer Effects on In-Person Surveys on Potentially Sensitive Topics

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AAPOR Conference
May 12, 2011

Thanks

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- The operations team at Edison Research and our team of 146 interviewers on 41 university campuses throughout the country

AP/mtvU Poll of College Students
Conducted by Edison Research

- Three surveys conducted of college students
  - February 28–March 6, 2008 - N=2,253
  - April 22–May 4, 2009 - N=2,240
  - September 20-24, 2010 - N=2,207
- Respondents were randomly selected from on-campus pedestrian traffic at 40 randomly selected four-year colleges throughout the United States
- Full-time university students between 18 and 24 years old were eligible to participate in the survey
### Potentially sensitive questions about mental health and well-being

- When you think about how things are going in your life in general, would you say you are very unhappy, somewhat unhappy, neither happy nor unhappy, somewhat happy or very happy?
- At any point during the last three months have you ever felt so stressed that you couldn't get your school work done?
- At any point during the last three months have you ever felt so stressed that you didn't want to hang out with your friends or participate in social activities?

### Potentially sensitive questions about mental health and well-being

- At any time during the past year have any of your friends talked about wanting to end their life, or not?
- At any time during the past year have any of your friends made a suicide attempt, or not?
- At any time during the past year have you seriously thought about ending your life, or not?
- If you were in serious emotional distress or were thinking about hurting yourself how sure are you that you would know where or whom to turn to for help?

### Potentially sensitive questions about mental health and well-being

- Since starting college, have you considered talking to a counselor or mental health professional to help you deal with your stress or other emotional issues, or not?
- Since starting college, have you received any type of support or treatment from a counselor or mental health professional, or not?
- Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental health condition (like depression, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, or others), or not?
How to maximize the accuracy of responses to these sensitive questions

Survey Methodology

- Sample of colleges was selected using a random stratified sample designed to reflect the distribution of four-year universities with more than 1,000 students by geographic region.
- Interviewers approached a random sample of students as they walked through a high-traffic central location on campus; respondents were selected using a fixed interviewing rate and asked to participate in the survey.
- Students filled out the questionnaire themselves and placed the completed questionnaire in an unmarked envelop that they sealed themselves to assure privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of responses.

University Interviewing Locations
Survey Methodology

- Interviewers recorded the gender of students who declined to participate in the survey
- The overall response rates were 47% in 2008, 48% in 2009 and 45% in 2010
- Respondents were given a $5 incentive upon completion of the questionnaire
- Final data was weighted to reflect probability of selection for each university, non-response by gender and number of college students by geographic region

Gender of Interviewer

- In order to minimize gender of interviewer effects, at each university location approximately half of the questionnaires were handed out by a male interviewer and half were handed out a female interviewer
- A total of 6,700 questionnaires were completed in the three annual surveys
  - 1,576 questionnaires handed out by male interviewers were completed by male respondents
  - 1,615 questionnaires handed out by female interviewers were completed by male respondents
  - 1,624 questionnaires handed out by male interviewers were completed by female respondents
  - 1,885 questionnaires handed out by female interviewers were completed by female respondents
Effect of gender of interviewer on demographics of respondents

Demographic questions
- Gender
- Age
- Class
- Race
- Hispanic
- Live on-campus
- Self-reported grades

Composition of sample
![Composition of sample chart]
Effect of gender of interviewer on responses to sensitive questions

At any point during the past three months have you ever felt so stressed that you couldn’t get your school work done?

* No significant differences
Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental health condition (like depression, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder or others)?

- Total: Yes 13, No 14
- Male: Yes 11, No 12
- Female: Yes 14, No 16

* No significant differences

At any time during the past year have you seriously thought about ending your life?

- Total: Yes 13, No 14
- Male: Yes 11, No 12
- Female: Yes 14, No 16

* No significant differences

Since starting college, have you received any type of support or treatment from a counselor or mental health professional?

- Total: Yes 13, No 14
- Male: Yes 11, No 12
- Female: Yes 14, No 16

** p<.10
If you were in serious emotional distress or were thinking about hurting yourself, how sure are you that you would know where or whom to turn to for help?

How much do you worry about the finances of your parents? (Asked only in 2009)

How safe do you feel on campus? (Asked only in 2009)

** p<.10

** p<.01
Conclusions

• Using a self-administered questionnaire along with a sealed envelop to maximize anonymity seems to minimize gender of interviewer effects for most sensitive questions.
• Response rates by gender do vary based upon the gender of interviewer.
• A few questions did show gender of interviewer effects.
  • Knowledge and use of mental health counseling services.
  • Worries about finances and safety.

AP Polls
http://surveys.ap.org/
http://www.edisonresearch.org