The effect of interviewer probing on item nonresponse and measurement error in cross-national surveys

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Research questions

- What effect does probing have on levels of non-response?
- How do probed responses differ from unprobed responses?
  - Does probing encourage people to report non-attitudes?
  - Does probing introduce additional measurement error?
- How does effect of probing vary depending on:
  - Type of item?
  - Individual characteristics?
  - Across countries?

Approach

- Experiments to test effect of interviewer probing run in three European countries as part of European Social Survey (ESS) Innovation Sample
- Data modelled using multi-group latent trait analysis to identify measurement differences between probed and unprobed responses

Experiment design

- F2F omnibus surveys in Hungary, Bulgaria, Portugal
- 1,500 respondents per country randomly assigned to treatment (75%) or control group (25%)
- Treatment group: Probed once in event of an initial DK response
  "We are interested in your views. If you are not sure please give the answer that comes closest to what you think"
Questionnaire items

- Questions on attitudes to welfare taken from Round 4 ESS
- Pseudo-knowledge items:
  Of every 100 people of working age in [country] how many would you say are:
  - Unemployed and looking for work? (PK1)
  - Long-term sick or disabled? (PK2)
  - Do not have enough money for basic necessities? (PK3)

- Agree/disagree items
  - Most unemployed people do not really try to find a job (AD1)
  - Many people with very low incomes get less benefit than they are legally entitled to (AD2)
  - Many people manage to obtain benefits and services to which they are not entitled (AD3)
  - There are insufficient benefits in [country] to help the people who are in real need (AD4)
  - Employees often pretend they are sick in order to stay at home (AD5)
Findings – pseudo knowledge items

- Probed responses do provide additional information about respondent’s underlying attitudes - factor loadings are not 0
- Probed responses have different measurement properties compared with immediate responses with no probing
- Effect of probing varies across countries
Findings – agree/disagree items

- Probed responses differ from unprobed responses
- Effect of probing bigger for agree/disagree items compared with pseudo-knowledge items
- Effect of probing varies across countries
- Findings based on modelling 3 out of 5 AD items (agreement = negative attitudes to benefit claimants)

Summary

- Probing reduces item non-response
- Probed responses can provide additional information about respondent attitudes

BUT:

- Probed responses have different measurement properties compared with immediate responses with no probing
- Effect of probing varies across countries
- Need to think carefully about whether to probe, especially in cross-national surveys