

A SHORT COGNITIVE TRAINING FOR INTERVIEWERS

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RATIONAL AND PURPOSE OF THE TRAINING PROGRAM

This short training program has been devised as a complementary training aimed at low-performers and newly hired interviewers. However, it can also be used as a refresher course for high-performers and even for supervisors. The program focuses on knowledge acquisition. The assumption is that knowledge will translate into the development of abilities because interviewers will better understand why they are asked to do certain things and what happens when they try to do them. The goal is also to increase interviewers' self-confidence and intrinsic motivation by giving meaning to their job and helping them find their own solutions to the problems they face, i.e., to tailor their interactions with respondents according to their own personal style.

The training can be conducted in a one-hour session, but it can also - and should preferably - be split in two one-hour sessions to allow for more interviewer input and questions. Following is a step-by-step procedure for implementation. The first experiment was conducted using a one-hour session format and targeted low-performers and newly hired interviewers (Durand, Gagnon, Doucet and Lacourse, 2005).

STEP-BY-STEP PROCEDURE

Introducing the training

Introduce yourself and state the purpose of the training session, i.e. to better inform the interviewers, get them to become more knowledgeable in order to help them find their own ways to make their work easier, more pleasant. Note that the ideal situation is to use a trainer that is not a member of the supervision staff or even exterior to the survey firm. In such a situation, it may be preferable that management does not attend the training so that the trainees feel free to voice their thoughts. Point this out to the trainees and reassure them as to the confidential nature of the training session.

Part 1: Population and sample

The scientific nature of the interviewer's activity is very important in conveying the importance of what they are required to do. Thus, this part of the training focuses on providing information on sampling in general and on the particular sampling frame used for surveys of the general population. It is aimed at teaching interviewers about the reasons why they have to select respondents and convince those selected to answer the survey.

1. A little history

To raise the interest of the trainees, introduce the notion of sampling with interesting facts from history. For example, talk about the old belief regarding the probability of dying when one's age is a multiple of seven, a myth that could only be debunked by research. You can also explain how it was once believed that surveys had to be done using whole populations, and how it was later realized that it was possible to use a sample as long as the laws of probability were followed by drawing the respondents randomly.

2. The M&M experiment

For this exercise, each trainee is given a small bag of M&M candies that is being used as an example of what constitutes a sample with respect to the general population. This experiment is inspired by an article by Auster (1990). Note that you will need a board on which to write the information that will be given by each participant.

a) What is a sample?

Define what a sample is and explain how each bag of M&M can be perceived as a sample of the general population of M&M's. Describe an analogy for the yellow candies that will be used in examples throughout the experiment to refer to a certain part of a sample or population. Try to pick an analogy that the interviewers are familiar with, for instance, a current or recent survey on which they have worked. Pick a sub-group of the sample that was interviewed (for example, the green party voters of an election survey).

Make the trainees separate the yellow candies from the rest and ask them to count 1) the total number of M&M's and 2) the number of yellows. (You may group interviewers by teams of two if you are using the large bags of M&Ms so that counting does not take too long.) Note this information on the board, then calculate the average and compare to the information on the M&M population that is available on M&M's Web site: <http://us.mms.com/us/about/products/>. Explain how each bag provides some information, with a margin of error. Make the analogy with surveys : Each bag is like a survey. Make clear that they have to estimate the proportion of yellows in the population of M&Ms and that the information source on which they rely for the estimation is a bag of M&Ms. What interviewers are working with is one bag of M&Ms, which contains various proportions of yellow, blue, etc.; in order to accurately count these proportions, each M&M in the bag has to be counted – which is equivalent to each person in the sample has to be interviewed.

b) What is the effect of non random non response on the sample?

i. Example with refusals

To illustrate the notion of bias from refusals, withdraw variously biased portions of M&M's from the participants and ask them to recount the yellows. Write this information on the board and recalculate the proportion of yellows. Explain how the discrepancy in the proportion of yellows constitutes a bias and make the connection with the importance of trying to convince respondents to answer. Referring to your analogy, provide an example on how refusals can affect the results of a survey.

Concretely: In our experiment, interviewers were conducting the Canadian Addiction Survey. One interviewer asked why he had to interview an old woman who does not drink nor take any drugs. Using M&Ms, it was easy to show that if you withdraw some “not yellow” candies, the proportion of yellow is no longer accurate and what interests us is not only the yellows but the relationship between yellows and non-yellows.

ii. Example with selection within the household

Take some M&M's from a participant, give them to another participant and make them both recount the candies. Write this information on the board and recalculate the

proportion of yellows. Explain how the discrepancy in the proportion of yellows constitutes a bias and make the connection with the task of randomly selecting a respondent within the household, i.e., interviewers working on this bag of M&Ms, not another one. Again referring to your analogy, provide an example on how failure to randomly select respondents can affect the results of a survey. Stress the reasons why interviewers have to interview a *selected* person when they phone a household.

c) Conclusion of the M&M experiment

Knowing how the samples of phone numbers to be called on surveys are generated appeared useful to trainees. In our experiment, interviewers asked how the phone numbers were generated. So be prepared to explain this process concretely, going into the details of how a RDD sample is produced. This will help trainees understand why they sometimes dial phone numbers that are not in service, allocated to businesses, etc. Encourage the trainees to provide feedback by asking questions such as:

- Do you have comments on what we have just seen?
- Do any of the notions remain unclear to you?
- Did you already know some of the information?

Part 2: Reasons for refusals

This part of the training provides information on: 1) why people refuse to answer surveys, 2) how experienced interviewers deal with refusals. It is aimed at informing trainees about what may be happening in the household that they are calling in order to reduce the stress associated with “taking it personally” (i.e., taking too much responsibility for the refusals and therefore becoming paralyzed by stress).

The content should be displayed on a screen or handouts so that trainees can read it as it is being presented. Note that whatever mean is chosen for the presentation itself, it is recommended to provide the trainees with handouts that they can use for future reference.

1. Reasons for refusals

a) Introduction

Explain that the information you are about to present is part of the results of a “survey on surveys” that was done to find out why respondents accept or refuse to participate in surveys. Present the information included in appendix A to the trainees and pay close attention to their reactions as you go. Try to get them to actively participate by periodically asking questions such as:

- Does this information surprise you?
- Does it confirm what you felt was true?
- Based on your own experience as an interviewer, do you agree or disagree with this information?
- What do you do when confronted with a refusal?
- Personally, how do you cope with refusals?
- Personally what kind of respondent are you? Do you generally accept or refuse to answer surveys? What reasons motivate your choice to accept or refuse?

b) Overview of content on reasons for refusals (see transparencies in appendix A for complete content)

The “survey on surveys” done by Goyder (1988) revealed that when asked about why they accept or refuse to participate in a survey, respondents refer to three types of motives: principled motives, context motives, and motives related to input, topic, sponsor or interviewer’s approach. Principled motives refer to positive or negative attitudes towards surveys that are based on principles such as the value of surveys or doubts about their confidentiality. Context motives refer to the situation in which respondents are at the time of the call, to their assessment of their ability to answer the survey and to their interest and “disposition” towards the disturbance occasioned by the call. Finally, motives related to input, topic, sponsor or interviewer’s approach refer to reasons that are based on the firm or interviewer’s side as opposed to the respondent’s side, for instance the interviewers’s approach or the topic of the survey.

Besides asking respondents about their reasons for accepting or refusing to answer a survey, Goyder (1988) also asked how important these various reasons were in making the decision to collaborate or not. Among the reasons cited as extremely or very important were both external factors, for instance what the respondent was doing when

the interviewer called, and internal factors, for example the “energy” and self-confidence displayed by the interviewer.

2. Tips from the best interviewers

In our interviews with talented interviewers, two factors were cited as being crucial to their work, i.e. taking control of the situation and never taking refusals personally. Present this information to the trainees (see appendix A) and pay close attention to their reactions as you go. Ask the trainees questions such as:

- Do you usually feel like you know and master the introduction?
- Do you usually feel like you know and master the questionnaire or the introduction?
- Do you usually feel like you are in control of the situation?
- What do you do when you get a refusal: immediately go to the next call or take a break?

Conclusion of the training session

Get feedback from the trainees by asking their impressions on the content, its usefulness in their general understanding of their tasks, etc. A week or so after training, you may get trainees to fill out the questionnaire included in appendix B in order to better evaluate how useful the training was. Note that this questionnaire can be used to compare trained and untrained interviewers. The first eight questions are for everybody. Only the last question is specific to trained interviewers.

References

- Auster, C. J. (2000). Probability Sampling and Inferential Statistics. An Interactive Exercise Using M&M's. *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 28, p. 379-385.
- Durand, C. Gagnon, M.E., Doucet, C. & Lacourse, E. (2005). An inquiry into the efficacy of a short training for interviewers. 60th AAPOR Annual conference, Miami Beach, Florida, May 12-15 2005.
- Goyder, J. (1988). *The Silent Minority*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

APPENDIX A

Transparencies used for the second part of the training

Why do respondents accept or refuse to participate in a survey?

- A. Principled motives
 - B. Context motives
 - C. Motives related to input, topic, sponsor, interviewer's approach
- I. Respondents mention various reasons to explain why they accept or refuse to participate
- A. Principled motives...
 - B. Positive attitude: 8% agree to participate for these reasons.
 - Surveys are valuable
 - Feelings of public spirit
 - C. Negative attitude: 27% refuse to participate for these reasons.
 - Concerns about confidentiality
 - Resentment over invasion of privacy
 - Anger at over-surveying
 - Unhappy experiences with surveys
- II. Respondents mention various reasons to explain why they accept or refuse to participate
- A. The context, the situation in which the respondent was when he was called, the respondent himself, his/her perceptions...
 - B. Situational motives : 17% refuse to participate for this reason.
 - The circumstances surrounding the call: respondent is busy, is expecting guests, is resting, etc.
 - C. Self-disqualification (15%)
 - The respondent does not feel qualified to answer, refers to his age or health as reasons not to participate.
 - D. The respondent is not interested, does not want to be bothered (23%)
- III. Respondents mention various reasons to explain why they accept or refuse participation
- A. Input, topic, sponsor, interviewer's approach
 - B. Field procedure: 32% agree to participate for this reason.
 - The respondent likes the general approach
 - The respondent did not have time to say no!
 - C. Survey sponsor: 39% agree and 4% refuse to participate for this reason.
 - D. Topic: 11% agree and 8% refuse to participate for this reason.
- IV. To sum up...
- A. Respondents say that the following factors are extremely or very important in their decision to participate :
 - External:

- a) What they were doing when the interviewer called (74%)
- b) Whether the topic of the survey is interesting (56%)
- c) Whether the topic of the survey is socially important (43%)
- d) How long the interviewer says it will take (58%)
- Internal :
 - a) The energy and self-confidence displayed by the interviewer (58%)
 - b) The respondent's first impression of the interviewer (52%)
- B. Respondent behavior is highly elastic, i.e. it is not pre-determined. Thus, respondents can be brought to change their minds under certain circumstances.

II. The best interviewers say that...

- A. Two factors are crucial
- B. Taking control of the situation
 - This implies mastery of the questionnaire and most importantly, knowing the introduction well enough to be able to say it without reading it.
- C. Never taking refusals *personally* and
 - Moving on to the next call immediately after a refusal is helpful in putting the refusal behind.

Imagining the situation in which the respondent might be when the interviewer called can be helpful (he/she just got back from work, I woke him/her up, etc.)

APPENDIX B

Post-training questionnaire

Q1 Generally speaking, if I compare my actual performance to my first days on this project, my capacity to convince people to answer surveys has... much improved1 ... slightly improved2 ... remained stable3 ... has slightly deteriorated4 ... has much deteriorated5
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Q2 How would you rate your level of agreement with the following assertions?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
a) People often refuse simply because I am calling at a bad time.	1	2	3	4
b) I generally feel in control of the situation when I interview respondents.	1	2	3	4
c) I do not need to read the introduction anymore; I know it by heart.	1	2	3	4

Q3 How would you rate your level of agreement with the following assertions?

<i>People often accept to answer surveys because...</i>	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
a) ...I don't leave them time to refuse.	1	2	3	4
b) ...they are interested in the topic of the survey.	1	2	3	4
c) ...the survey is sponsored by renowned organizations.	1	2	3	4
d) ...I make a good impression.	1	2	3	4
e) ...I am self-confident	1	2	3	4

Q4 As of now, I can find good arguments to convince respondents to answer the survey...most of the time1 ...often2 ...sometimes3 ...rarely4 ...never.....5
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Q5 In my opinion, the interviewer has much influence, some influence, not much influence or no influence on the decision of a respondent to answer a survey.	Much influence	1
	Some influence.....	2
	Not much influence.....	3
	No influence at all.....	4
Q7 I understand how the phone numbers that I call are selected...	...very well.....	1
	...quite well.....	2
	...not very well	3
	...not well at all.....	4
Q8 I understand the reasons why I can't interview just any person within the household that I am calling...	...very well.....	1
	...quite well.....	2
	...not very well	3
	...not well at all.....	4

Q9 How would you rate your level of agreement with the following assertions?

<i>The training program which I attended on (insert date)...</i>	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
a)...has helped me better understand why people sometimes refuse to answer surveys.	1	2	3	4
b)... has helped me better understand why I must convince people to answer surveys.	1	2	3	4
c)...has helped making me more comfortable with convincing respondents.	1	2	3	4
d)...has helped me find arguments to convince respondents to cooperate.	1	2	3	4
e)...has helped me understand how the phone numbers that I am calling are selected.	1	2	3	4
f)...has helped me understand why I can't interview just any person within a household.	1	2	3	4