

An Investigation of the Impact of Departures from Standardized Interviewing on Response Errors in Self-Reports about Child Support and Other Family-Related Variables

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Over the past 25 years, the study of error in self-reports has largely been the domain of cognitive psychology with a focus on invariant cognitive factors and processes in controlled laboratory settings. Unfortunately, this line of research has all but removed the interviewer and the interaction between the interviewer, respondent, and the question from discussion. In this paper I explore what effect the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent has on accuracy as they go about the task of participating in a survey interview. I examine whether departures from standardization, as measured with interviewer-respondent interaction codes, predict response accuracy in a standardized survey interview. The importance of this research is underscored by the growing sentiment that standardization can undermine validity and that in order to benefit from the conversational nature of the survey interview, interviewers should be allowed flexibility in their role. I find that when questions ask for information that is less cognitively demanding to recall, changes interviewers make to the wording of the questions have either no effect or lower response accuracy. In contrast, when questions ask for information that is more cognitively complex, interviewers' departures from the exact reading of the question may be done in such a way as to facilitate recall. For almost all of the questions considered, interviewers' followup behaviors are associated with less accurate reports as are several behaviors enacted by respondents.

This paper makes use of a unique collection of data sets. Survey reports primarily come from the Parent Survey 3 (PS3), a survey of child support and other issues related to living in a separated family that was developed in order to examine factors that might influence the accuracy of respondents' reports and to improve the accuracy with which information was reported. Potential respondents for the PS3 were identified using a reverse record-check design in which parents were selected for participation from a sample of court records. Survey reports are compared to the court records in order to evaluate the accuracy of the reports. The survey interviews were also tape-recorded and the behaviors of the interviewers and respondents coded using an elaborate interactional coding scheme. By comparing the results of the interviewer-respondent interaction to the accuracy of responses to various questions in the interview, I examine the impact of these behaviors on reporting errors.