Extremes and Modes in Surveys

Ye, Fulton, & Tourangeau (YFT) completed a meta-analysis to explore the link between survey mode and response patterns. They make the following points, among others:

1. “We carried out a meta-analysis of the results from 18 mode experiments. Overall, we find that telephone respondents are more likely to select the most extreme positive option than respondents to Web, mail, or IVR [interactive voice response] surveys but not respondents to face-to-face interviews. Although most of the studies we examined were conducted using CATI [computer-assisted telephone interview], we think that the important variable is the presence of a telephone interviewer rather than administration by computer. We find no evidence for a mode difference in preference for the extreme negative response option…” [pp. 360-362]

2. “In total we located 12 studies that met these criteria [YFT’s study specifications]…Because multiple papers include more than one mode comparison, our meta-analysis includes a total of 18 comparisons of CATI with other modes…The studies we incorporated were conducted between 1967 and 2009 and covered a variety of subjects…” [p. 353]

3. “Rosen and Tesser (1970) argue that people are generally reluctant to communicate information that is likely to be undesirable for the recipient, dubbing this tendency the ‘Mum about Undesirable Messages (MUM) effect.’ If respondents exhibit a similar reluctance to give negative evaluations in interviewer-administered surveys, this may explain their heightened tendency to select the most positive answer in a telephone survey compared to a mail survey…The MUM effect applies to situations in which the message is undesirable for the receiver. This is quite different from the concept of social-desirability bias, which refers to the respondents’ reluctance to reveal embarrassing information about themselves. In a survey context, the MUM effect means that respondents in a customer satisfaction survey may avoid giving negative evaluations of their local branch bank or of a fast-food restaurant…” [p.351]

4. “When the options are presented aurally [as in telephone mode], respondents often do not have the opportunity to process the earlier options and are likely to begin processing the last option they hear…Because the most extreme option is the last to be presented in telephone surveys, this tendency to select the last option may lead to more extreme answers being chosen. In contrast, respondents in surveys that present information visually [online and paper surveys] usually have more time for cognitive processing and can review the question as well as response options before selecting an answer…” [p.352]

5. “…the format of the response options often differs between telephone surveys and other modes, and this may contribute to any preference for selecting the most extreme response option. In telephone surveys, it is common to provide only the endpoints of the scale to the respondent…however, in visual modes, fully labeled scales result in more positive ratings than the endpoint-labeled scales…” [p. 352]

This study will interest researchers because it can help them to conduct better surveys. Cong Ye (graduate student, Joint Program in Survey Methodology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD), Jenna Fulton (same as Ye), and Roger Tourangeau (Research Professor at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI) provide details in an article (“Research Synthesis: More Positive or More Extreme? A Meta-analysis of Mode Differences in Response Choice”) published in Public Opinion Quarterly (Summer 2011, Vol. 75, No.2, pp. 349-365). Readers with a background in survey research will find the content and style of the paper accessible.

Additional abstracts of research can be viewed at our website at:

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