Preventing & Detecting Interviewer Falsification

Webinar Overview

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- Please hold questions until the end
- Slides available at www.srl.uic.edu/SEMINARS/semnotes.htm
Curbstoning

Leo Crespi’s 1945 paper "The Cheater Problem in Polling," gave us the informal term “curbstoning” to refer to interviewer falsification. The challenge of preventing and detecting interviewer falsification in research continues to this day.

When falsification is not detected, the integrity of your research and the statistical conclusions of your data could be significantly compromised.

Definition of Falsification

Interviewer falsification refers to the intentional departure from the designed interviewer guidelines or instructions, unreported by the interviewer, which could result in the contamination of the data.

Intentional means that the interviewer is aware that the action deviates from the protocol.
Definition of Falsification

Falsification can include:

1) **Fabricating all or part of an interview**
   - Your interview might include a module of standard questions, followed by various health measures. The interviewer may have administered the standardized questions, but skipped over the health measures.

2) **Deliberately misreporting disposition codes to make work appear better than it is**
   - Coding a refusal as an ineligible
   - Making up contact attempts
3) **Deliberately miscoding the answer to a question in order to avoid follow-up questions**

There may be complex modules in your questionnaire that are only administered if the respondent screens in as eligible. If the respondent says yes, they have used drugs in the last 30 days, but the interviewer codes it as no, they will skip out of a potentially long module and finish the interview more quickly.

4) **Deliberately interviewing a non-sampled person in order to reduce effort required to complete an interview**

- Interviewing willing adult at home, vs. properly sampled adult
- Interviewing someone from another apartment on the same floor; not from sampled unit
Prevalence of Falsification

Certain characteristics of interviewers, characteristics of respondents or sampled units, and features of the interview task affect the likelihood that falsification will occur.

- Your study design and available resources play important roles in the likelihood that falsification will occur.

Conditions for Falsification

Examples of design factors, some of which may be necessary for high quality surveys, that may influence falsification include:

a. Difficult to locate or enumerate sample members
b. Interviewer-delivered incentives for respondents
c. Interviewer production bonuses
d. Long, complex interviews or data collection protocols
e. Short field periods
## Conditions for Falsification

### EMPATHY FOR RESPONDENTS
- Empathy might make FIs do things they perceive will make responding easier for participants.

- This empathy also comes into play in challenging interview environments – when interested subjects approach the interview and beg to be interviewed for the study (because word is out about the study incentive).

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### Conditions for Falsification

Family pressures, financial problems, school deadlines, and health issues can also affect job performance.

Attentive supervisors may note these circumstances and can take steps to minimize falsification risk (higher rate of validation; more frequent meetings).
Prevalence of Falsification

Interviewer-assisted data collection typically occurs in two environments: centralized telephone facilities and through face-to-face interviewing of sample members in the field.

Differences in these two environments affect the ability to prevent and detect interviewer falsification. Falsification is more likely to occur outside of a centralized telephone facility, though examples of falsification abound there too.

Preventing Falsification

Starts with interviewer hiring and training:

- Hire interviewers who can work fairly regular shifts (makes it easier to monitor production)
- Pay by the hour for all work – contact attempts, interviewing, paperwork
- Do not pay production bonuses
- Reference checks are recommended, and criminal background checks may be advisable.
- Require all newly hired interviewers to sign a pledge of ethical behavior describing the importance of data integrity and the consequences of falsifying data.
Preventing Falsification

You need to have staff person assigned to interviewer management full-time. Account for this at time you are preparing your budget! This person responsible for:

- Reviewing interviewer production
- Meeting with interviewers on a regular basis
- Examining paradata against timesheets

Preventing Falsification

Key paradata to look at:

- Percent of cases finalized as complete
- Refusal/eligibility rates
- Hours per completed interview
- Average length of interview
- Percent of households that provide phone number for validation
- Household composition average
Interviewer Training: Key Points

1. Let interviewers know that you not only are checking their work, but how you will do it:
   “Because I know they are checking my work, I am going to collect the most accurate data possible.”

2. Emphasize contact attempts over completed interviews.
   “The goal is for me to make every effort I can to get a completed interview, but when I have made every effort to get the interview and it does not pan out, I have a record of my efforts and that is just as important.”

Interviewer Training: Key Points

3. Make interviewers an important part of the study
   “Because I am part of this study team, I am going to do my best.”

4. Provide training on how data will be used – why good data matters
   At SRL, we ask our clients – the principal investigators who secured the research funding – to attend interviewer training to talk about the impetus for the research, and how the data will be used. This helps create the mindset of “Because I understand how important this study is and how it will help the target population, I am going to collect the most accurate data possible.”
Monitoring

Monitoring of interviewers is a bit easier in a centralized telephone facility.

Most survey organizations are set up to monitor interviews ‘live’ during an interview (and can also monitor their key strokes).

Even then, validation of telephone completes should be done.

Validation

Validation involves re-contacting cases that have been finalized as a completed interview. Upon re-contact, we determine the following:

- The interview took place
- The respondent’s answers were correctly recorded
- Length and location of interview
- If incentives were paid, amount and form
SRL Validation Protocol

- Collect phone # during interview for validation purposes ("supervisor may want to check up on my work")
- Completed interviews are randomly selected
- Goal is to validate 10% of each FI’s completes after accounting for non-contacts and refusals
- When FI can’t get to or keep 10% validation, additional scrutiny of their work is performed (including in-person validations)

Validation

You should create a validation instrument:

“We are making a quality check on the work of one of our field representatives who interviewed you at your home recently for the STUDY. I would appreciate it if you could answer a few questions for me.”

Be careful not to re-ask behavior or opinion questions that could have changed since the time of the interview; if the answers differ, you won’t know if that’s due to falsification or true change.
If Falsification is Discovered

If you suspect falsification has occurred in any form, you should:
1. Immediately suspend interviewer until your investigation is complete
2. Perform 100% validation of the interviewer’s work
3. Remove any falsified interviews from your dataset
4. Report the falsification in your final reports

Questions To Ask Data Collection Vendors

If you hire a vendor to collect data for your research study, questions you should ask include:
1. How are interviewers paid?
2. How is interviewer work and performance monitored?
3. What are the firm’s validation procedures?
ORI Research Clinic

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Research Integrity (ORI) and Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) have an online training module called The Research Clinic designed to teach both clinical and social researchers how to avoid research misconduct and protect subjects.

http://ori.hhs.gov/TheResearchClinic

Seminar Evaluation

Thank you for attending today!

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We would also love to hear your ideas for future SRL Webinars.
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