

Alternative Methods for Exploring Confidentiality Issues Related to Dependent Interviewing

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Abstract: Several surveys employ a panel design in which respondents are interviewed at multiple points in time ("waves") over the course of several months in order to investigate the dynamics of certain life events. Many of these surveys use some form of "dependent" interviewing in which information gathered in one wave is carried over into subsequent waves in an attempt to reduce repetitiveness and burden, aid recall, reduce spurious change, and generally provide a sense of continuity over the life of the survey. Recent efforts to improve the Survey of Income and Program Participation have begun to focus on understanding and improving these dependent interviewing techniques. There were several goals to the current research. First, respondent debriefings were conducted following a Wave 1 interview to explore: (1) respondents' attitudes toward confidentiality and dependent interviewing; and (2) their reactions to a statement asking for consent to divulge information to other household members during later waves. A split-ballot design was used for this debriefing in order to compare substantive results from an open-ended versus a closed-ended debriefing protocol. These findings were used to further refine the consent statement, and then the original and the new statement were evaluated in a Wave 2 follow-up debriefing. In addition, Wave 2 cognitive interviews were conducted to assess how respondents reacted to dependent interviewing in general. Results indicate that whereas a small minority of respondents expressed concerns about sharing information with children and with sharing financial information, in general respondents reacted quite positively to dependent interviewing techniques and the vast majority had no privacy or confidentiality concerns.

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I. Introduction

Several surveys employ a panel design in which sample members are interviewed at multiple points in time (waves) over the course of months, or sometimes years, in order to investigate the dynamics of certain life events. For example, the Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and the University of Michigan's Panel Survey of Income Dynamics (PSID) both use this technique to study changes in labor force participation, government program assistance, income, and other indicators of well-being. Many of these surveys use some form of "dependent interviewing," in which information gathered from one interview is used in subsequent interviews to remind the respondents of previous answers, to address inconsistencies between current and previously reported information, and to provide continuity from wave to wave, promoting a more natural flow of the interview.

Recent efforts to improve the SIPP have begun to focus on improving dependent interviewing techniques, but have been hindered by the lack of research in the topic area. In a recent literature review, Mathiowetz and McGonagle (2000) reported that dependent interviewing appeared to be effective in certain very targeted situations, but that "the empirical literature is very limited with respect to experimentation in the design phase of dependent interviewing and is weak with respect to the assessment of the impact of dependent interviewing." The authors further reported that the effects of dependent interviewing on respondents' perceptions and attitudes about the confidentiality of their data are both unclear and undocumented. They suggested, for example, that respondents might have concerns about sharing data from previous interviews with other household members, or different interviewers, at subsequent wave interviews. For lack of any empirical evidence on the topic, the authors recommended qualitative research such as focus groups and debriefings to explore the issue further.

For Census Bureau surveys, the matter was further complicated in 1998 by the implementation of a Respondent Identification Policy (RIP) on sharing personal information within a household. The policy states that:

The Census Bureau may provide that personal information to (an)other individual(s) in the household only if the respondent authorizes us to do so in general or by giving us the name(s) of people who can be given that information. The Census Bureau may always provide personal information to the same person who originally provided the information (Gates, 1998).

Because of this new policy, and because the literature is limited, the current research was designed to examine the role of privacy and confidentiality in respondents' attitudes toward the use of dependent interviewing techniques. The approach was to "cast a wide net" in order to identify a wide range of relevant issues, and then examine these findings for consistent patterns that emerged regardless of the method used. First, straightforward Wave 1 interviews were conducted, followed by respondent debriefings to explore: (1) respondents' attitudes toward confidentiality and toward providing and sharing information within the household; and (2) their reactions to a statement asking for consent to divulge information to other household members during later waves. A split-ballot design was used for these debriefings in order to compare substantive results from an open-ended versus a closed-ended debriefing protocol. These

findings were then used to further refine the consent statement. Four months later the same respondents were recontacted for a Wave 2 follow-up interview, which included dependent interviewing techniques. Cognitive interviews were used to assess the Wave 2 instrument, followed by respondent debriefings to evaluate respondents' reactions to the old and new consent statements, and to probe their general reactions to dependent interviewing.

While the primary objective of this research was to begin to uncover some of the substantive issues surrounding dependent interviewing, a secondary goal was to learn more about methods of inquiry. To that end, we employed a variety of techniques in the data collection -- respondent debriefings (open- and closed-ended), paraphrasing, vignettes, and cognitive interviewing. Analysis included results from all these sources, as well as previous large-scale field tests and a recent literature review. As is often the case with research of this sort, evaluation of the utility of various methods is hindered by a lack of outside truth with which to compare findings from different methods. In this case we were further handicapped by the dearth of existing evidence on dependent interviewing in the literature. As a default approach to evaluation of alternative methods, then, we use consistency of findings as a criterion. That is, we assess core findings that manifest across several methods, then examine results unique to one method, and finally assess the effectiveness of the multi-method approach.

II. Background

In order to comply with the RIP policy, the Census Bureau has been exploring various ways of requesting respondents' permission to share their data with other household members. Both large-scale field tests and cognitive testing of this "RIP request" have been conducted over the past three years. Altogether four different versions of the RIP request were tested in the cognitive lab in an iterative fashion. That is, when problems were identified by one round of respondents, the RIP request was modified accordingly and retested on the next round of respondents. In some versions, many respondents misinterpreted the request, erroneously thinking the Census Bureau would be attempting to recontact the household to verify information provided by the initial respondent, not to update the information (DeMaio and Hughes, 2001). The final round of testing used the following wording:

We re-contact households over a two-year period for this survey to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household next time, instead of you, is it OK if we use your answers as a starting point?

Testing in the final round indicated that all five respondents seemed to comprehend the intent of the request, though one stated that the term "starting point" was ambiguous.

Several large-scale field tests that included a RIP request very similar to this wording have been conducted to determine the extent to which respondents would decline,¹ thus sometimes preventing the use of dependent interviewing procedures in future waves. Some of these studies also examined the demographic characteristics of those who declined RIP, and some explored the reasons they declined. Table 1 displays the percentage of respondents who declined the RIP request. It should be noted that in two of these studies with high rates of decline (MPSIPP 2000 at 16.6% and MPSIPP 2001 at 11.9%), the RIP request was implemented poorly, such that many respondents were unavailable to answer their own RIP request and were coded as "declined" by default. When the implementation was improved in the next iteration of the survey (MPSIPP 2002) to allow most respondents to answer the RIP request for themselves, the rate of decline dropped to 8.5%. Thus, with proper implementation the rate of decline appears to be in the range of 6-8%.

Table 1: Respondents Declining RIP Request in Large-scale Field Studies

Survey	Field Period	Declined RIP Request
Questionnaire Design Experimental Research Survey (QDERS) 1999 (Loomis, 1999)	Summer, 1999	5.7%
American Housing Survey (AHS)(Bates, 2000)	Fall, 1999	8.3%
Methods Panel Survey of Income and Program Participation 2000 (Bates, Doyle, Gates, 2001)	Summer, 2000	16.6%
Methods Panel Survey of Income and Program Participation 2001 (Doyle, 2002)	Summer, 2001	11.9%
Methods Panel Survey of Income and Program Participation 2002 (Pascale, 2002)	Summer, 2002	8.5%

Three of these studies (AHS, MPSIPP 2000, and QDERS) also investigated demographic characteristics associated with declining the RIP request. While there were slight inconsistencies across the three studies on Hispanic origin and race characteristics, all three studies showed that declining RIP was associated with not being married, having less than a high school education, and owning few financial assets. Two of the three studies (AHS, QDERS) also indicated that females and those aged 65 or older were more likely to decline RIP. Finally, these two studies

¹"Decline" is used throughout this paper as a very broad term to mean "did not say yes" to the RIP request. This was done partly for convenience for the reader, and partly because any non-yes answer to RIP functions within the instrument the same as a "no." That is, if there was a "don't know" or missing data for RIP, we erred on the side of caution, assumed the respondent would not want their answers shared with other household members, and refrained from using dependent interviewing techniques.

also indicated that the level of declining the RIP request was almost identical in households with and without non-relatives (Bates, 2000; Bates, Doyle, Gates, 2001; Loomis, 1999).

Whereas these results provide insight into *who* declines RIP, they provide no direct data on *why* respondents decline. To address that question, two of the studies (QDERS and MPSIPP 2002) included an open-ended follow-up question asking those who declined the RIP request what concerned or bothered them about the request. Results from these studies were fairly similar (see Table 2), and suggest that most respondents who declined the RIP request misunderstood the question (Loomis, 1999; Pascale, 2002). In both studies the main reason cited by respondents who declined (38% in QDERS; 42% in MPSIPP) was concern that other household members would be poor candidates with whom to conduct a follow-up interview -- either because they would be unwilling, unable (due to a physical or mental disability, or a lack of knowledge about household affairs), or too young. Below are some typical examples recorded by interviewers:

- my husband won't answer -- you are lucky you got me to answer
- I know the information best and spouse will not do survey
- husband can't hear well on the telephone
- husband has Alzheimer's
- grandmother is 90 and does not know anything
- prefers not to have daughter speak to us as only 16 and not aware of all items in household

In spite of this dominant finding, a non-trivial minority of RIP decliners did voice privacy and confidentiality concerns -- 17% in QDERS and 20% in MPSIPP. It's not entirely clear, however, how many of these respondents had explicit concerns about sharing data with other household members (versus more general confidentiality concerns), since coding conventions across the two studies varied slightly. The QDERS study included only one overall category on privacy/confidentiality. The MPSIPP study, however, included two sub-categories within this broad category -- those who expressed explicit concerns about sharing data with other household members, and those who expressed confidentiality concerns but did not clearly indicate a concern with other household members. Only 3/45 (7%) of the MPSIPP cases explicitly voiced a concern about sharing data with other household members. Presumably some -- perhaps all -- of the nine QDERS and the six MPSIPP respondents who expressed non-specific privacy/confidentiality concerns were indeed concerned about sharing data within the household, but due to the generalized category it's impossible to tease apart those who had concerns about other household members in particular. It appears from these two studies, then, that among the respondents who declined the RIP request, as few as 7%, or as many as 20%, are concerned about their data being shared with other household members. Even at the high extreme, prevalence of the type of confidentiality concerns the RIP policy was designed to protect is fairly low among those who decline the RIP request.

Finally, in almost one-third of the cases in each study (31% in QDERS; 29% in MPSIPP 2002) the reason for declining RIP was uncodeable. While this is a non-trivial number of cases, it is very difficult to speculate on how these answers, if codeable, would have affected the

distribution. Therefore we simply note that the stability of these results is vulnerable due to the relatively high level of missing data.

Table 2: Respondents' Reasons for Declining RIP Request

Response	Respondents			
	QDERS		MPSIPP 2002	
	n	%	n	%
A. Concerned with privacy/confidentiality (non-specific)	9	17%	9	20%
Explicitly concerned about sharing data with other household members	NA	NA	(3)	(7)
Concerned about sharing data, but not clear if within or outside hh or both	NA	NA	(6)	(13)
B. Does not like to give the government any information	1	2%	2	4%
C. Concerned that other household members wouldn't, couldn't or shouldn't conduct next interview	20	38%	19	42%
D. Language concerns or barrier	NA	NA	2	4%
E. Does not want to be contacted again	6	12%	NA	NA
F. Not enough information to code	16	31%	13	29%
TOTAL	52		45	

NOTE: "NA" indicates that the reason appeared only in one of the two surveys' open-ended responses.

III. Study Design and Methods

The current research project approached dependent interviewing, and associated privacy and confidentiality concerns, from several different angles. The data for analysis was produced primarily from several rounds of cognitive interviewing and respondent debriefings across two waves of interviewing. Each wave is described below, along with the components of data collected.

WAVE 1

1. Baseline interview: First, a straightforward "baseline" interview was conducted using the Methods Panel Survey of Income and Program Participation 2001 core instrument, covering the following main topics: demographics, labor force participation and earnings, government program participation, asset ownership and earnings, and health insurance. Altogether 34 respondents were recruited using various sources including the Census Bureau's respondent database, welfare centers, and word-of-mouth among staff. Because the objective of the research

was to examine sharing data among adults within a household, only respondents living in households with two or more adults were recruited. Interviewing was conducted in June through August of 2001 by Census Bureau staff. Within these 34 households, a total of 74 individual household members were identified. Among those 74 individuals, 40 conducted their own self-interview and also conducted proxy interviews for the remaining 34 unavailable household members. The main objective of this baseline interview was simply to collect the Wave 1 data in order to "feed back" the information using dependent interviewing techniques in a Wave 2 follow-up interview.

2. Respondent debriefing: At the conclusion of the baseline interview, respondents took part in a short debriefing to examine various aspects of privacy and confidentiality associated with dependent interviewing techniques. Several different methodologies were used to conduct the debriefing, as described below:

A. Paraphrasing: This was used to explore the respondents' comprehension of the RIP request. The paraphrase was straightforward, simply asking respondents to say in their own words what the request was asking.

B. Vignettes: Because the concept of feeding back prior data, and thus possibly sharing that data with other household members, could prove too arcane for respondents to truly understand and carefully consider, vignettes were used to provide examples of the ways in which information provided in Wave 1 might be revealed to a different household respondent in Wave 2. The vignettes were used to shed further light on respondents' understanding of the RIP request, to gauge their "sensitivity level" to sharing certain types of information, and to determine whether they would change their initial answer to the RIP request after having heard some specific examples of how data from the Wave 1 interview might be shared with another household member.

C. Open vs. closed debriefings: Additional debriefing questions explored respondents' feelings and comfort level with allowing the information they provided in the Wave 1 interview to be shared with other household members in a subsequent interview. Other related themes were explored, such as the respondents' perceptions of the terms privacy and confidentiality and the distinction between the two. As mentioned above, because very little research has been done on these aspects of dependent interviewing, a split-ballot design was used to evaluate two debriefing methods: open-ended and closed-ended designs. Fourteen open-ended and 18 closed-ended debriefings were conducted.

WAVE 2

1. Cognitive interviews: Four months after the Wave 1 baseline interview, respondents were re-contacted for a Wave 2 interview. Due to attrition, only 23 of the original 34 households were re-interviewed. In contrast to the straightforward Wave 1 interview, the Wave 2 interview was conducted as a cognitive interview, with probing focusing on questions and phrases employing dependent interviewing, such as "Last time I recorded that you worked for [Employer X]. Do you still work for [Employer X]?"

2. Respondent debriefings

A. Debriefing: At the conclusion of the cognitive interview, a short debriefing was conducted to assess respondents' general reaction to dependent interviewing techniques. Respondents were asked for their opinions and feelings about questions in the instrument that "fed back" information provided in prior interviews. They were also asked about their recall of the RIP request and whether they felt any differently about it after having experienced a Wave 2 interview.

B. Wording of RIP Request: Findings from the Wave 1 debriefing described above were used to craft a revised RIP request that would address weaknesses in the question wording that were identified in Wave 1. Both the original and the revised RIP request were presented in the debriefing and respondents were asked to compare them on clarity and ease of understanding.

IV. Results and Discussion

WAVE 1

1. Baseline interview

Similar to findings from large-scale field tests, a fairly small minority of respondents (3/40 or 7.5%)² declined the RIP request in the Wave 1 baseline interview.

2. Respondent debriefing

A. Paraphrasing

²Percentages throughout the "Results and Discussion" section should not be interpreted as statistics, given the small number of respondents studied and the non-systematic sampling method. We provide percentages strictly as a convenience to the reader, since the base of respondents varies across method. Numerator and denominator data are also shown.

The Wave 1 debriefings began by asking respondents to paraphrase the RIP request that they were asked at the end of the Wave 1 interview:

We re-contact households every 4 months to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household next time, instead of you, is it OK if we use your answers as a starting point?

The debriefings revealed a number of findings regarding the clarity of the RIP request. Among the 28 people providing a response to the RIP paraphrase, 20 (71%) seemed to understand the RIP request and 8 (29%) seemed not to. The misunderstanding appeared to be, in part, a misinterpretation of the phrase “as a starting point” (see also DeMaio and Hughes, 2001). A number of respondents did not understand that this meant the interviewer would be sharing their answers with other members of their household on subsequent visits. Instead respondents thought that their answers would be used as examples to explain questions to other respondents (not necessarily other household members), or that they were consenting to having the interviewers refer to the current data collection as a credibility check in the introduction for other household members in subsequent visits. For example:

“I wasn't sure...didn't really understand what it is to use my information as a starting point. I guess if someone didn't understand the question maybe you'd use my answers to explain.”

“What it means to me is that an interviewer may call and refer to this survey, this current interview, as a starting point, as an introduction as to who you are.”

Respondents' misunderstanding of the RIP request also stemmed from a misinterpretation of the people with whom the Census Bureau would share their information. Respondents did understand that their answers would be used, but thought their answers would be shared with other respondents outside their household or others outside the Census Bureau. For example:

“That means somebody else in the same situation that I am might have another interview with somebody else. You want to talk them and use the same techniques that you used on me.”

“It's basically asking me if it's OK that you use answers that I have already given.”
[And who might we be telling the answers to?]
“I wouldn't know...outside of your office.”

A finding of particular interest was from respondents who *did* exhibit an understanding of the RIP question. In a number of cases these respondents indicated that what they were doing was giving “their permission” for the Census Bureau to use their answers as a reference in subsequent interviews, even if the interview was conducted with another household member. For example:

“When someone from your agency comes back, or calls back, to discuss our information, and I'm not available, I have given my permission for someone else to talk to you and that you may use my words from this meeting.”

“That you conduct the survey every 4 months and the next time you conduct it you may want to talk to someone else in the household and you want permission to use the answers that I have given you.”

The way in which these participants paraphrased the RIP request suggests that the question is essentially asking them for their explicit permission to use the answers they have provided with someone else in their household. Based on these comments, a revised RIP request was drafted for subsequent testing:

This survey re-contacts households every 4 months to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household next time, instead of you, do we have your permission to share your answers with that person?

In order to correct the misunderstandings caused by the original RIP request, the phrase "is it OK if we use your answers as a starting point" was replaced with "do we have your permission to share your answers with that person." This change was designed to be more specific about the request for the respondent's permission to share their answers, and to be more clear about the people with whom their data would be shared. This revised RIP request was examined in Wave 2 debriefings discussed below.

B. Vignettes

As described above, three vignettes were used to provide examples of the ways in which information provided in Wave 1 might be revealed to a different household respondent in Wave 2. Examples were designed to go from "less sensitive" to "more sensitive" information; the first vignette asked about sharing information about place of employment, the second asked about receipt of food stamps, while the third asked about perhaps the most sensitive topic for this context -- income from stocks. First respondents were asked if these hypothetical examples were similar to what they had in mind when they contemplated the RIP request. Only 4/28 (14%) respondents said "no." Interestingly, all four of these respondents were judged not to have understood the RIP request based on their paraphrases. Another four respondents, however, were also judged not to have understood the RIP request based on their paraphrases, yet they said the vignette examples were what they had in mind. It's possible that these four respondents were simply exhibiting acquiescence bias, or that they really did grasp the dependent interviewing concept but hadn't been able to express it very clearly in the paraphrasing task. In any case, respondents who did not anticipate the types of examples provided in the vignettes were likely quite confused about the RIP request yet provided an answer. This suggests that a small but non-trivial number of respondents is fundamentally uninformed about what they agree or don't agree to regarding data sharing within the household; some may give consent but actually would not if they truly understood the request, while others may decline the request but for reasons other than confidentiality (as was shown in the field tests).

Regarding the sensitivity of the examples, many respondents were not especially concerned about any of the topic areas, but eight had some concerns about stocks, and two had concerns about food stamps. Five other respondents had no concerns about sharing data within the household, but again expressed concerns that other household members would not be knowledgeable enough to answer the questions.

The final issue addressed by the vignettes was whether or not respondents would have changed their answers to the RIP request after having heard some specific examples of how dependent interviewing works. The majority of respondents (24/27 or 89%) said they would not have changed their answer. Four of these respondents also reiterated their concern with certain household members not being knowledgeable enough about household affairs. Two of the three respondents who said they would change their answer to the RIP request both said they had no problems with interviewers sharing information with their spouses, but did have concerns about sharing information with their children.³

Results provide some evidence that the majority of respondents do, indeed, have a fairly good idea of what is involved with dependent interviewing. Furthermore, results suggest that a sizable minority has some concerns about sharing financial data among household members, and a smaller minority is concerned about sharing data with children in the household.

C. Open vs. closed debriefings

While several sub-themes of dependent interviewing were explored in the debriefings, only two will be discussed here: respondents' reactions to having their data shared within the household, and respondents' perceptions of the terms privacy and confidentiality. For the former issue, two different versions of debriefing questions on sharing information within the household were asked. The open version asked:

If I came back in 4 months and interviewed someone else in your household, and shared some of the information you gave me today about yourself, how would you feel?

The closed version asked:

How comfortable would you be if I came back in 4 months and interviewed someone else in your household and shared some of the information you gave me today about yourself? [Followed by a 5-category response set, going from "very comfortable" to "very uncomfortable"]

Most respondents (8/10) who received the open-ended question said they had no problem with this; three of the eight said the other household members already know the information anyway. One respondent said she had no problem with us sharing information with her husband, but did not want us sharing information with her children. Again, two respondents expressed concern that other household members wouldn't be knowledgeable enough to conduct the interview. In the closed-ended version, which explicitly focused on respondents' comfort level, 12/17 (71%)

³Due to imprecision in the capture of the data, however, it's unclear whether this concern had to do with young children, teenagers, or adult children living with parents. Furthermore, respondents were not routinely notified that only persons 15 years old and older are eligible for a self-interview. Therefore, it is possible that a number of respondents who were concerned about interviewers sharing information with children were thinking of young children, who would not be candidates to receive that information anyway.

said they would be very or somewhat comfortable, while 4/17 (24%) said they would be very or somewhat uncomfortable. Follow-up questions were asked to determine whether the comfort level depended on which household members we'd be talking to. Two of the four said no, and two said yes, specifying that they wouldn't want us talking to their children. Other follow-up questions were asked to determine whether the comfort level depended on what type of information would be shared, and some respondents 3/12 (25%) said financial data would concern them. Given the relatively small sample sizes, the substantive findings seem quite similar across both treatments: the majority of respondents (70-80%) are fairly comfortable with dependent interviewing, but a minority is concerned about interviewers sharing information with their children and with sharing financial information.

Respondents were also asked a number of questions regarding the definitions of the concepts of privacy and confidentiality. In general, respondents either explicitly said that the terms privacy and confidentiality meant the same thing to them, or they described both similarly as meaning not sharing information with a third party. These results support other recent research suggesting that respondents do not draw clear distinctions between the concepts of privacy and confidentiality (Martin, 2000). As Martin suggested, if respondents do not discriminate between privacy and confidentiality, a threat to privacy could be viewed as a threat to confidentiality and vice versa. For the current research, this implies that the RIP request could be viewed as either a threat to privacy or confidentiality.

The closed-ended debriefing questions included two questions that specifically asked respondents their opinions about the RIP request as it related to an invasion of privacy or a breach of confidentiality. Ten out of 15 respondents indicated that providing information about someone else in their household was an invasion of their privacy. On the other hand, five out of ten respondents who answered "yes" to the RIP request indicated that it would be a breach of confidentiality for the interviewer to reveal information that they provided to someone else in their household in a subsequent interview *if* the RIP request had never been asked. Whereas the RIP request does not seem to necessarily alleviate concerns about invading other household members' privacy, results of the debriefing interviews do suggest that the RIP request provides the appropriate notification to make respondents comfortable with dependent interviewing techniques in subsequent interviews.

WAVE 2

1. Cognitive interviews

As described above, cognitive interviews were conducted on the Wave 2 instrument, which embedded data gathered in the Wave 1 interview in the following general manner: "Last time I recorded [x]. Is that still the case?" For the most part, the dependent questions posed no problems for respondents, and there was no evidence that they elicited privacy or confidentiality concerns. The testing, however, identified other issues that could be problematic for general dependent interviewing. For example, one respondent had a job at the end of Wave 1 with Employer X, lost the job part way into Wave 2, and was later re-hired by the same employer but

in a different position. So the question: "Last time I recorded that you worked for [Employer X]. Do you still work for [Employer X]?" caused some ambiguity. These types of ambiguities, however, could likely be addressed through a combination of interviewer notes and training that clarifies when a situation should be considered "continuous" and when it warrants being recorded as two discrete events.

A separate issue has to do with motivating the respondent to carefully consider real change between Waves 1 and 2. In two cases, both members of a married couple conducted a self-interview in Wave 1, but only one of the spouses conducted the Wave 2 interview, proxying for the absent spouse. In both cases the respondent had some difficulty answering questions on earnings from assets because the absent spouse had reported them in Wave 1 and was most knowledgeable about them. Both of these respondents said to record "whatever was in the computer from last time," and each case had different implications for data quality. In one case the Wave 1 data was unavailable (due to a programming error) so she reluctantly checked records and found that there had been a change in income between Waves 1 and 2. In the other case, the respondent simply did not know about the accounts and didn't have records available, so the Wave 1 reports were used as a prompt and then recorded as Wave 2 data. In this case it's likely that using the spouse's Wave 1 reports as Wave 2 data were more accurate than either the respondent's guess or a "don't know" response. So while one case suggests that the availability of previously-reported data may decrease respondents' motivation to check records or otherwise calculate true earnings for the current wave, the other case suggests that Wave 1 data may be better than forced data from an unknowledgeable respondent.

2. Respondent debriefings

A. Debriefing

A short debriefing was administered at the end of the Wave 2 interview to probe respondents on various aspects of dependent interviewing. When asked if they were surprised by or concerned about the capability of the instrument to carry previously-reported information from one wave to the next, without exception all 23 respondents said they were not surprised or concerned. Many volunteered comments like "It would have caused me concern if you made me tell you things I'd already told you," "I was delighted," "I expected it," and "I didn't expect you to throw it away." Most respondents thought dependent interviewing techniques made the interview go more quickly and smoothly. Two respondents, however, thought it didn't make a difference, and one thought it made the interview go slower, saying that it gave her an extra task -- first to remember what she said last time and then to figure out if there had been any change. When asked if it bothered them that their information was stored on the computer, again all respondents unanimously said "no." Several said they weren't concerned about this because they had been given a confidentiality assurance. One respondent, however, had grave concerns about the promise of confidentiality, believing that the Census Bureau had sincere intents and desires to keep the information confidential but that if someone really wanted the data they could get it. Respondents were also asked if they would have any concerns if there was a change of interviewer between Wave 1 and 2. All ten respondents for whom the interviewer switched between Waves 1 and 2 said no -- the interviewer switch didn't matter.

Finally, respondents were probed about their recall of the RIP request, and whether after having been through a real Wave 2 interview they felt differently about their initial response to the request to share information within the household. Most respondents remembered answering the RIP request, and only three said they might have answered differently. Two of these respondents, however, were reacting to hypothetical situations. For example, one reiterated that she would have no problem with us sharing information with current household members, but might not want her information shared with a new household member.

B. Wording of RIP Request

The Wave 2 respondent debriefings included a question that asked respondents to compare the original RIP request with the revised RIP request, and indicate which of the questions was easier to understand.

Original RIP Request:

We re-contact households every 4 months to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household next time, instead of you, is it OK if we use your answers as a starting point?

Revised RIP Request:

This survey re-contacts households every 4 months to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household next time, instead of you, do we have your permission to share your answers with that person?

Of the 20 respondents who provided information, four (20%) indicated that the original RIP request was clearer, 12 (60%) indicated that the revised RIP request was clearer, and four (20%) indicated that there was no difference in the clarity of the two questions. The preference for one version of the RIP request over the other seemed to be based, in part, on the conversational tone of the statement. For example, a respondent who preferred the original RIP request said:

“Well, it seems more to the point. It's not condescending. It's real easy to understand.”

On the other hand, a respondent preferring the revised RIP request said:

“The second one is more direct. I would think if you were trying to gain permission and make it clear, then the second one is the way to go... [the original RIP request is] just a conversational question. It's not as direct.”

The percentage of respondents who preferred the revised RIP request compared to the original RIP request, however, suggests that most respondents prefer a less conversational style that is more specific about the request. Of particular interest were the comments respondents made about the specificity of the revised RIP request with regard to giving one's permission to use their information. For example, one respondent said:

“The second one is more clear. People realize what they're being asked to do. It makes people think that they really are giving their permission.”

This was not always viewed as a positive attribute, however, with one respondent suggesting

that:

“Neither is more clear. The second one is more polite because it asks for permission, and people like that, but it raises the issue: ‘well I have something to give -- do I want to give it?’”

Finally, one respondent who indicated a preference for the first question suggested that the reason was because:

“I think you might get someone to agree to the first one more.”

Looking at these respondents’ comments together suggests that the revised RIP request does more clearly articulate that respondents would be giving their permission to use the information that they provided for future interviews with someone else in their household. Interestingly, however, the respondents’ perspective on whether or not this is a positive effect differs. On one hand, being clear that they are giving their permission is a positive aspect. On the other hand, being clear that one can give *or withhold* information may increase the likelihood that respondents will *not* give their permission to use their answers.

This seems to put at odds the notion of maximizing cooperation (and possibly response rates) vs. maximizing respondent understanding of the request. We suggest that being clear and forthright with respondents is both methodologically and ethically appropriate, and the Census Bureau should not knowingly obfuscate the intent of messages. An additional caveat, however, is that a potential danger exists that drawing too much attention to the act of giving one’s permission to use their data may unintentionally increase the respondents’ perception of the sensitivity of the data, as has been found for confidentiality assurances (e.g., Singer, Hippler & Schwarz, 1992; Singer, Von Thurn & Miller, 1995). Indeed, in the debriefing we found some very clear examples of this type of "induced concern:"

- I: How would you feel if I had interviewed [adult child, age 18]?
- R: ...I think it would be inappropriate for any adult that my children don’t know who would come and ask them questions about their parents’ financial situation. I think that is inappropriate. I also think it wouldn’t work because the don’t know the answers in the first place...
- I: Now does age matter there?...But how about your mother?
- R: OK, so now we are saying that I’m her adult child, so then we could turn the question...
- I: So for the same reason that you said that it would be inappropriate for your children to talk about your financial information would you think it would be inappropriate...
- R: You know, now that we are evolving into this I would say that I would think would be inappropriate for me to discuss my mother's financial affairs currently. However, if I were...um... what’s the term... power of attorney, then it would be most appropriate.

Initially the respondent expressed concern about his financial information being shared with his teenage child, but did not appear to have confidentiality concerns about sharing this type of information with his mother. When the general concept of parents sharing financial information with their children (regardless of age) was probed more deeply, however, one could almost see the lightbulb go off in the respondent’s head, and then he expressed concern about discussing his mother’s financial affairs. The question remains, then, whether the concern was always there and the probing simply uncovered it, or whether there was no concern but the probing created it.

This unanswered question aside, the results of the Wave 2 debriefings clearly indicate that the majority of participants found the revised RIP request to be more clear and direct than the original. In the interest of maintaining the clarity of the question while attempting to avoid elevating levels of respondent concern, the following compromise RIP request might be appropriate:

We re-contact households every 4 months to update information. If we talk to someone else in your household next time, instead of you, is it OK if we share your answers with that person?

By replacing the phrase “do we have your permission” with the more colloquial "is it ok" we believe this version of the RIP request reduces the chances that the question would increase respondents' concerns about the sensitivity of the data, while maintaining the clarity about the possibility of sharing their answers with someone else in their household. We feel this could be an appropriate replacement for the original RIP request.

V. Summary

Some findings across the multiple methods of inquiry employed in this research were, of course, more robust than others. The core findings, manifesting across methods, are summarized here:

- Across several previous field studies, the percentage of respondents who declined the RIP request ranged from about 6-8%.
- Among respondents who declined the RIP request, only 7-20% voiced some concerns about privacy and confidentiality; the other 80+% misunderstood the request, many believing it was a request for a subsequent interview with other household members. Indeed, respondents in the vignettes, both debriefings and in field study RIP follow-up questions often expressed concern that other household members wouldn't or couldn't conduct a subsequent interview.
- Both the vignettes and paraphrasing revealed that a non-trivial number of respondents did not understand the initial RIP request -- almost 30% misunderstood in the paraphrasing; about 14% in the vignettes. The paraphrasing also revealed something about the nature of the misunderstanding, indicating that the problematic phrase seemed to be the request to "use your answers as a starting point." Respondents also seemed unsure of the people with whom their information would be shared. A revised RIP request that attempted to remedy these problems was judged to be more clear and specific by most respondents in a later debriefing.
- Vignettes provided some evidence that most respondents had a basic grasp of how dependent interviewing works. Wave 2 cognitive interviews revealed that respondents had no problems with privacy or confidentiality in relation to dependent interviewing, and the Wave 2 debriefings provided overwhelming evidence that respondents expect and want dependent interviewing techniques built into the survey.
- The open and closed debriefings both indicated that most respondents had no problems with dependent interviewing as executed in this study. In both the vignettes and in the open and closed debriefings, however, a small minority of respondents said they had no problem sharing data with their spouse, but did have concerns about sharing information

with children in the household. The debriefings also indicated that respondents felt the RIP request provided adequate notification on the use of dependent interviewing techniques.

- The vignettes revealed that when presented with the most "extreme" case (revealing another household members' previously-reported stock earnings), almost 30% of respondents had some concerns, but none of these respondents said they would have changed their answer to RIP, even in light of the example. Two respondents, however, did specify that they would have concerns about their financial information being revealed to their children (not to their spouses). The closed-ended Wave 1 debriefings also indicated that some respondents (25%) had concerns about sharing financial data.
- Though respondents very much appreciated dependent interviewing techniques, there were some small indications that the method could introduce its own set of problems. Specifically, Wave 2 cognitive interviews revealed that in some cases the phrase "are you still [x]" could be ambiguous. There is also a risk that respondents will lose motivation to give careful thought to recent income and instead attempt to rely on previously-reported amounts. On the other hand, in some cases that previously-reported data may be of higher quality than new reports from a respondent who is simply not privy to the information on income.

Given the scant attention this topic has received in the literature to date, we feel the multi-method approach was effective in identifying some of the major issues and concerns, as well as advantages, of dependent interviewing. Although some of the findings are tentative, they do suggest avenues for further research on issues that may or may not manifest as problems.

VI. Conclusions and Future Research

These results suggest several avenues for future research. With regard to the wording of the RIP request, though evidence indicates that the revised version is an improvement, the wording has not been tested in a "fresh" setting. Respondents in this survey had been through two rounds of interviewing, and had been probed extensively on the original RIP request, before being asked to evaluate the revised request. Furthermore, the final "compromise" RIP request is slightly different from the version tested in the lab. Specifically, we take a step back from the phrase "do we have your permission" [to share information] and instead suggest the phrase "is it ok" in an effort to be more conversational and less alarming. Accordingly, we would recommend both another round of cognitive testing of the revised, untested RIP request, and that any modified version of the RIP request that is part of a large-scale or production study include a follow-up question asking respondents why they declined the request.

A second more drastic approach to research on the RIP request would experiment with a 2-question approach. Given the results that many respondents confuse the request to *share information* across household members with the request to actually *interview* other household members in 4 months, we suggest de-coupling the two concepts. That is, first ask/establish that a follow-up interview will be attempted in 4 months, *then* in a separate question request

permission to share information from the Wave 1 interview with other household members. We realize, however, that this could create problems in the field. Most interviewers are reluctant to explicitly notify or request permission to come back for a follow-up interview, preferring to simply make the attempt when the time comes. Collaborative research with field staff may help inform a research strategy that takes this into account. With regard to dependent interviewing in general, there seems to be strong evidence that it is quite positively received by respondents. Future research could focus on relatively small glitches, such as the ambiguity of the concept of "continuation" in some situations. Research could also focus on how to balance maintaining previously-reported information with motivating the respondents to refer to records or otherwise calculate accurate recent figures.

We offer one final note on the impact of RIP. One of the previous field studies (MPSIPP 2001) included a Wave 2 interview which provided data on the frequency with which the same respondent was interviewed in Waves 1 and 2. This is a key variable because if the same respondent is interviewed in both waves, RIP has no impact since "the Census Bureau may always provide personal information to the same person who originally provided the information" (Gates, 1998). In MPSIPP 2001, 75% of respondents in Wave 1 conducted their own interview in Wave 2 (Doyle, 2002). Given this rate and the relatively low number of respondents who declined the RIP request in Wave 1, only 4.6% of all Wave 2 adult interview cases were devoid of dependent interviewing techniques on account of RIP.

While these findings demonstrate the relatively low impact of RIP on production interviewing, there seems to be great potential to reduce that impact even further in light of the findings that only 7-20% who decline RIP actually have confidentiality concerns. Taken together, these results raise questions about the best way to make clear to respondents what the implications of dependent interviewing techniques are, without raising unwarranted privacy and confidentiality concerns.

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