Abstracts Booklet

New Frontiers in Preventing, Detecting, and Remediating Fabrication in Survey Research
February 13, 2015
Cambridge, MA.

Title: The Cheater Problem Revisited: Lessons from Six Decades of State Department Polling

Presented by: Regina Faranda
                Office of Opinion Research, Acting Director
                U.S. Department of State

Nearly 70 years after Leo Crespi's paper "The Cheater Problem in Polling," the challenge of preventing, detecting, and – in those rare instances – mitigating the damage from falsification remains. In the U.S. Department of State's Office of Opinion Research, which owes its founding to Dr. Crespi and other survey pioneers, we face this issue in some of the 200 surveys we conduct in nearly 100 countries yearly. Our office has faced institutional challenges in confronting falsification, including the instinct to shy away from tarnishing all of our research in the eyes of a sometimes skeptical audience, doubly so when the stakes of representing international publics are high. We have also grappled with limited capacity, both in terms of time for uncovering possible fraud and in the technical ability to systematically do so.

This presentation will underscore the need to weave the ethos of confronting falsification into the fabric of survey research, and not just in an international context. It will focus specifically on the quality control process that State's Office of Opinion Research has developed over several years. The process includes a procedural checklist that our researchers must follow before reporting data, changes to our requirements for collecting paradata and metadata, and systematic guidance on approaching field firms to deal with cases of possible fraud.

Title: Systems and Processes for Assuring Data Quality

Presented by: Rita Thissen
                Manager, Center for Technology Solutions, Research Computing Division
                RTI International

This presentation describes some of the methods used at RTI to detect and deter falsification and to improve data quality. For in-person interviewing, we use computer audio-recorded interviewing (CARI) and/or brief verification phone calls. For telephone surveys, we combine live monitoring and review of audio-recorded sessions. For surveys conducted by interviewers using mobile devices, we collect global positioning system (GPS) coordinates. In addition, we conduct systematic review of data for item non-response, timing outliers, duplicate records and high levels of CARI refusals, and our survey supervisors hold quality-review discussions on a regular basis. The combination of these techniques provides a multi-sourced, evidence-based process for quality assurance that supports various survey modes and adapts to new forms of falsification. Summary results and illustrative examples will be given to the extent allowed by survey sponsors.

Title: Preventing Data Falsification in Survey Research: Lessons from the Arab Barometer

Presented by: Michael Robbins
                The Arab Barometer, Project Director

The Arab Barometer has conducted face-to-face surveys in 14 countries over nearly a decade. During this time we have encountered multiple instances of clear or suspected data falsification, resulting in the rejection of entire or partial datasets in some cases. By far the most common problem relates to duplicate observations. However, rather than encountering exact duplicates, our experience reveals that often interviewers and/or firms attempt to conceal duplicates observations by randomizing responses for a number of variables within these observations in order to pass standard tests for duplicates.

In our effort to improve the quality of our survey data, we have developed a Stata program that tests for exact and near-exact duplicates. The program provides the maximum percent of shared responses to individual variables between an observation and its closest match across the dataset. For surveys with a large-n and a large number of variables, we find that the maximum percent match for each observation should approximate a Gumbel distribution with a mean of roughly 0.7 or less.   If it does not, and especially if there are many observations with a high maximum percent match, then it is it is likely these observations were falsified in some manner. However, if the maximum percent match approximates a Gumbel distribution, the demographic categories approximately match the sampling frame, and expected correlations hold between key variables in the dataset, the odds of data falsification are significantly reduced.

Using these tests, we have identified clear falsification in data collected as part of the Arab Barometer. Initial analysis suggests that similar instances of data falsification exist in other publicly available datasets. Examining the cases of Kuwait and Morocco from the third wave, I detail how these tests can be implemented in practice to improve data quality, especially in face-to-face international survey research.