



Roundtable on research design, data collection and innovation

Summary of Discussions

Introduction

The meeting was undertaken under the Chatham House Rule; these summary notes give an account of the issues discussed at the meeting.

The roundtable aimed to bring together those specialising in data collection (mainly from social research agencies and institutions and government); those, working mainly in academe and government, who wanted to commission or use data to explore policy questions, for description or explanation; and other commissioners. The premise was that everyone has a shared interest in robust and reliable data with appropriate research designs. Despite growing potential and use of administrative data, or big data, for many of the questions we need to address, there remains a role for primary data collection, often involving face-to-face interviewing. That was the specific topic for discussion at the roundtable.

Presentation 1: Response Rate Trends

See attached PowerPoint presentation slides 2-28. This covered the secular decline in response rates. It presented evidence in aggregate about a range of studies and, while the general trends were similar for all, looked too at differences in absolute levels of response rates, and possible methodological and substantive explanations for the long-term decline in response rates. It showed that non-contact rates with prospective sample members had been driven down or kept low, but that refusal rates have been increasing, as have the number of calls needed to get an outcome. Increasing amounts of effort had been needed to reach the response rates achieved. Wider possible social explanations were explored.

Presentation 1: Roundtable Discussion

A number of issues were raised:

Modes and Evidence

Response rates are different with different modes (face-to-face, telephone, online, etc.). Overall there is a lack of research or experiments exploring issues affecting response rates; more detailed research would be helpful to gather the necessary empirical evidence.

Interviewers

Interviewer interaction is a significant factor affecting response rates, particularly how they engage people within the first 30 seconds. Interviewers report that 'sugging' (selling under the guise of research) and 'frugging' (fund raising under the guise of

research) are having an impact on the public's perception of what is research, their trust in research surveys overall and this is affecting willingness to participate.

Commissioners and Users

The value and impact of research is often not communicated, or not communicated well. Research commissioners need assistance from the experts, the research agencies, in educating them about response rates and the impact of declining response. If a response rates is less than 50% what should commissioners be saying? Is it still robust? If response rates are decreasing does that mean commissioners have a problem that can be fixed or not?

It was accepted that response rates mattered but a key feature was the importance of efforts in gaining response from reluctant responders, to counter self-selection bias. There was no magic target that guaranteed data were sufficiently robust for generalisation.

Commissioners reported that response rates are a relatively straightforward concept to relay to Ministers, and also other stakeholders, such as procurement. If other indicators were to be used – about the representativeness of the sample for example – this would need new evidence and simple to understand metrics will be needed to enable the adoption of different approaches. The suppliers need to assist commissioners to be able to adopt such new approaches but the commissioners would welcome a move away from a focus only on response rates as the sole measure of data quality.

Presentation 2: Fieldwork and Operational Challenges

See PowerPoint presentation slides 29-41. This session covered the operational workings needed to carry out random-sample interviews. It looked at the decline in such fieldwork since 2010, and challenges in recruiting interviewers who can carry out this work. It also summarised findings from surveys of interviewers about the challenges of carrying out random-sample surveys.

Presentation 2: Roundtable Discussion

MRS Interviewer Research

The interviewer responses were similar for each of the four agencies whose interviewers participated in the MRS Interviewer Research in 2016 and 2017. The suppliers also clarified that the operational structures and interviewer employment approaches used by the four agencies are similar. ONS reported that it also undertakes interviewer research.

The Future Field Force

There is a risk that, over the next few years, field forces, as currently set-up, may no longer be sustainable without understanding of the challenges they face; current costing structures may also need to be addressed. , The session had shown that that experience levels overall are dropping, due to increased polarisation in years of service, with a small number of experienced interviewers and fewer cohorts of new interviewers staying long enough to replace them. There is more churn with more inexperienced interviewers as part of existing panels.

Alternative employment opportunities offered by the "gig economy" may be part of the reason for the decline in interviewer recruitment and retention, as well as the changing requirements of interviewing roles to maintain response rates, such as demanding interview targets, irregular working hours at evenings and weekends, and so on. It was agreed that while hourly rate of pay was important, there was a need to continue to

have mixed incentives for interviewers in terms of contact rates, hourly pay, response rates, fieldwork rules and so on, to counter-balance some of the disadvantages of the role.

ONS reported that additional reasons were increased monitoring (via mobile phones/devices for example), used partly to ensure interviewers are safe and partly to obtain evidence of call patterns, has reduced the sense of freedom and autonomy which was considered the most attractive feature of the interviewing role within the ONS field force. In fact, concerns over personal safety generated the lowest level of concern in both the 2016 and 2017 MRS Interviewer Survey.

The Role of Commissioners

It was recognised that commissioners could perhaps do more to help with the peaks and troughs of data collection by co-ordinating plans for some of the larger data collection exercises. More could be done to ensure that the scheduling and timing of this demand was managed by commissioners.

Presentation 3: Participation Rates and Relationship to Inference

See PowerPoint slides 42-66. This session looked at evidence about non-response bias and total survey error. It presented empirical evidence from studies of non-response bias, which showed that total response rates were not highly correlated with non-response bias. It also examined the relationship between number of interviewer calls needed to achieve an interview and survey estimates, and concluded that increasing the number of calls beyond about 4 increased overall response rates but did little to reduce non-response bias. However, the relationship between non-response bias differed across variables and it was concluded that further empirical research on the topic would be helpful.

Presentation 3: Roundtable Presentation

Research Design

Targeting specific groups of non-responders can have its benefits. In practice, the economics do not allow this; most research surveys have contracts that specify an overall response rate to be achieved, which will override the ability to consider alternative approaches.

There has tended to be an assumption that relationships between variables are less likely to be affected by non-response bias. There is also a view that 'big data' are less likely to be representative of some groups, depending on the process by which they are collected. However there is limited empirical evidence about these issues, and more would be helpful. For other methods such as diary surveys, self-completion, physical measurements, etc. it was not clear whether the same principles would apply.

It was agreed that (again) more research is needed on response, inference and different research and survey design.

Role of Commissioners

There was acknowledgment among the commissioners that the competitive commissioning process could act as a barrier to change, as aspects of the design, ways of promoting the research among respondents, and so on did not always feature in tenders, and too often aspects of the design were set before the tender, leading to competition on costs only, rather than quality. For new studies, earlier competitive

tenders for pilots might be essential, so that final research design choices were informed by empirical evidence.

Presentation 4: Strategic issues to consider for better data

See PowerPoint presentation slides 67-78. This session started by summarising previous sessions, in particular the secular decline in response rates, the need to sustain interviewing panels if face-to-face interviews were to continue to be possible, and the need for more information about non-response bias. While greater usage of administrative and other data meant that face-to-face surveys were no longer the only means of collecting information, they would remain essential for some purposes.

Some tentative thoughts were offered about possible issues to explore. These included: the need for more empirical piloting of new designs; the need for more explicit statements of key aims of research as designs were formulated; a programme of methodological work on non-response bias; and a move away from a focus on the headline response rate as the sole measure of data quality. One option might be a focus on an agreed process (numbers of calls, proportion of reissues) to drive up response and minimise the ease of self-selection into response, which could help procurement processes. This might have budgetary implications, both in funding more piloting and methodological work, and in increasing the costs per interview to ensure data quality.

Other issues raised included the need for strategic engagement with the Information Commissioner about opt-in/ opt-out designs, data linkage (under the aegis of the new Digital Economy Act), consents, and so on.

Presentation 4: Roundtable Discussion

Role of Procurement and other stakeholders

Some participants felt that public sector procurement process tends to result in over-ambitious proposals that are under-costed. A 'discovery period' to tease out research design issues, before research is formally tendered, could be explored. There was a view that research commissioned directly by government departments engaged earlier (often before tenders) with fundamental design issues, while these were often left too late with research commissioned by the research councils.

Optimal Research Design and Tendering Process

There was some discussion about whether matters could be improved to improve data designs, including evaluations. The difficulties with Life Study were discussed, and the extent to which earlier data collection experiments might have enabled it to continue; it was however a very complex study. More generally, it was acknowledged that most publicly funded research could benefit from design improvements, and this was perhaps a particular challenge for multi-purpose surveys such as were needed for academic research. Again, earlier procurement and competition and piloting of fundamental research design was viewed as particularly important in these multi-purpose surveys.

Some expressed the view that obtaining funding to understand and do better surveys will be a difficult message within government. However, commissioners need to promote the value of survey data to government, and explain why it is being commissioned. It was recognised that expertise exists within the research agencies to help provide this kind of methodological insight, and that agencies could assist with these discussions, including whether surveys, or indeed other research alternatives, should be considered to address the current policy challenges within government.

It would be beneficial to have a forum to discuss many of the issues raised, and perhaps separate meetings looking at tendering. The Social Research Association, the Campaign for Social Science and the Market Research Society could be useful convenors or intermediary bodies.

Research Participants

It was acknowledged that we needed to put research participants at the centre of some of these discussions. Younger participants might perceive the whole face-to-face approach as an anachronism of the 20th century. We need more research into what works in encouraging participation as well as longer-term consideration of alternatives.

Some participants felt that there is an increasing view among some senior stakeholders within government that surveys are on their way out. It was agreed that there is a move towards alternative methods – administrative data, big data and so on. However there are many topics that are not well-covered by administrative data -- such as family life, parenting behaviour, retirement planning, and indeed many behavioural and attitudinal aspects – the understanding of which is necessary to evaluate policies or understand social causation, and so there remains an important role for face-to-face surveys.

Next Steps

1. The summary notes and presentation slides from the session will be circulated, first to participants and then in an agreed-form made available on the MRS, SRA and Campaign for Social Science websites.
2. The group of associations and suppliers are going to continue to work together on the issues discussed including:
 - a. exploring alternative metrics to response rates in contract and procurement management to ensure high quality research outputs; these might include harder 'process based' measures, such as the number of calls, distribution over times of day, and an agreed maximum of re-issues; and
 - b. creating a centralised portal of research evidence, and educational materials for clients and stakeholders.
3. Commissioners and funders agreed it would helpful to consider the scope for change including:
 - a. the potential for creating a forum for the consideration of timing and management of large scale data collection across public sector research projects;
 - b. the scope for funding to build the empirical evidence base about the various methodological issues discussed;
 - c. the allocation of funding between pre-tender and tender of major studies, especially those based upon new designs; and
 - d. what could be done within the public sector to improve the value of research survey data.
4. A follow-up event will be planned for the end of 2017/beginning of 2018, giving research agencies, the associations, commissioners and funders time to consider the issues raised and to consult more widely with other colleagues and stakeholders.