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Title:

Attitude questions and the ‘stropky’ respondent

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Abstract:

Some survey respondents quickly gain the label ‘stropky,’ or difficult, respondents. Their interviews take longer; they quibble with wording; their responses do not easily fit the response categories available to them on the interview schedule. In short, they challenge the ‘rules’ of survey participation. Interviewers are also faced with a challenge. Often, in the subsequent analysis of the survey data, their responses will be omitted because they are often the ‘don’t know’ or ‘neutral’ responses. However, these respondents can tell us a great deal about the nature of questions and the implications for reliability and validity.

Attitude questions are routinely included in many social surveys. This research, using questions asking women about attitudes to having children from *Negotiating the Life Course*, an Australian longitudinal telephone survey, focuses on interaction between one interviewer and four ‘stropky’ respondents—Annegret, Carol, Jess and Kristen. What strategies do these respondents use to insist on their meaning being heard and taken into account? What strategies does the interviewer draw on to accommodate ‘stroppiness’ and keep the respondent in the survey at the same time as obtaining a response to the questions?

For demographers, these so-called difficult respondents provide more information about issues of interest to demographers than might be expected, particularly the reasons why women might or might not want to have children. Their omission from analysis of survey data warrants further consideration.