Survey Gremlins: Using Name Generators to Ellicit Social Networks
Interviewer Effects, Web Effects, and Panel Conditioning

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What is a Social Network Name Generator?
“From time to time, most people discuss important matters with other people. Looking back over the last six months, who are the people with whom you discussed matters important to you?” (US General Social Survey)

Research Questions

1 • Does the implementation of social network name generators in an online versus a telephone survey create different patterns of response?
2 • Are interviewer effects present in network name generators delivered via telephone?
3 • Does asking a name generator repeatedly to a panel create problems?

Background

Name generators are a popular way to elicit a respondent’s friends and social connections

US General Social Survey contains one of the longest running social network name generators

• Follow up questions ask for the characteristics of first five people named
• Name generators have several known problems:
  - Interviewers skip the questions to reduce the survey length
  - Respondents understate the number of friends to reduce survey length
  - Research demonstrates that the same questions given to the same respondent over time can introduce systematic variation in results (panel conditioning)

Data

• 1,726 North Carolina clergy surveyed in 2008, 2010 and 2012
• Survey Modes:
  - 2008: phone (652), web (999), mail (75)
  - 2010/12: web
• 95%, 87% and 81% response rate

References and Acknowledgments

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Key Findings

• Web survey: many more people report 10 or more friends
• Two interviewers appear to prompt to receive 5 names (# receiving follow up questions about each person named)
• One interviewer appears not to prompt at all
• Interviewees change their response patterns over time and report having 5 friends

Discussion

• Larger number of friends on web vs. phone could result from:
  - Interviewer fatigue/shortcutting is an important data quality issue
  - Population stable on demographics: change in reporting, not real change in social networks
• Challenges common wisdom that respondents forget survey questions over time
  - Because clergy view many conversations about “important matters” they give a lot of names
  - Adds to growing literature questioning the validity of important matters name generators

Recommendations for Practice

• For web surveys: collect names one at a time and display names already given
• Carefully monitor interviewer behavior on name generator questions during data collection
• Use focused name generators to mitigate against very large list of names
• For panel surveys: don’t limit the number of names to which followup questions will be applied
• Carefully monitor interviewer behavior on name generator questions during data collection
• For web surveys: collect names one at a time and display names already given

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What is the Duke Clergy Health Initiative?
The Duke Clergy Health Initiative is an $18 million, seven-year program intended to improve the health and well-being of United Methodist clergy in North Carolina. It surveys clergy on a variety of health and occupational related outcomes.