No easy answers to acquiescence bias

MARKETING RESEARCH

It may be hard to imagine what relevance an article titled "Acquiescence in Kazakhstan" could have to survey research in the United States, but it has some.

The article, written by Debra Javeline and published in the Spring 1999 issue of Public Opinion Quarterly, talks about the greater or lesser tendencies of respondents to agree with statements presented to them rather than disagree. Research pioneer Benjamín Likert first discussed the subject in the 1930s, and many researchers since have noted that this acquiescence varies greatly—not only across individuals, but also across groups, especially those that are culturally defined.

For example, on average, it is strong among Americans, whose culture encourages optimism, positive thinking and cooperation, but not among others like the French, whose culture encourages reserve, criticism and skepticism.

The article describes a study among some 2,000 adults, split evenly between ethnic Kazakhstan and ethnic Russians. In each of the subsamples, half the respondents were given one set of statements and the other half a set of statements worded the opposite way. To register a particular view on a subject, a respondent in the first half would have to agree, while a respondent in the second half would have to disagree. As expected, there was a cultural difference: Whatever statement they responded to, the percentage of Kazakhstani who agreed was higher than the proportion among Russians.

The results raise a caution flag for interpreting multinational survey results when questions are asked in an agree-disagree mode. Even in domestic surveys, it may be useful to consider the possibility of acquiescence bias differences between segments based on ethnicity, age or other factors. The POQ article did not address the question of the interview medium; the survey discussed was a face-to-face interview, and it is possible that acquiescence bias is different, and probably smaller, for other mediums.

The survey covered six topics, three of which also were tested using a different question format—forced choice. This format (for example, "In order for a country to recover economically, should prices be free, or should they be controlled by the state?")

Apple purchases Minnesota company

Computer giant Apple quietly purchased a Minnesota firm that figures prominently in the Macintosh maker's new Internet strategy, which includes a system for protecting children from harmful online content.

NetSelecta, a small Minneapolis business, has designed a program called "KidSafe," which allows parents to control what their kids see and do on the Internet. Instead of attempting to compile an exhaustive list of objectionable online sites for use in Net-blocking "filter," NetSelecta blocks all online content except for sites approved by a panel of teachers and librarians.

Apple handled the software, also called NetSelecta, on its iMac and iBook computers beginning in 1998. NetSelecta was formerly called EView and it billed itself as a full-service supplier of parental-control software with versions of NetSelecta for Windows 95 and Windows 98 as well as for the Mac OS.

—by The Associated Press

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