

**Title:** *Who's asking? Interviewers, Their Incentives and Data Quality in Field Surveys*

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In all surveys except self-administered ones, interviewers have a critical role in representing the study to respondents. Because most of their work is difficult or impossible to observe directly, historically research has been obliged to deal with "interviewer effects" in data collection as a type of statistical artifact, rather than addressing interviewers' behavior. This paper focuses on two sets of behavioral decisions made by interviewers in field surveys that have serious implications for the quality of the data collected.

First, there is the decision to apply effort to convince respondents to participate in the survey. Because interviewers typically face strong pressures to complete interviews with minimal expenses, they are implicitly guided to apply effort to cases they believe are most likely to be completed. Unless respondents are immune to persuasion entirely, such behavior will, assuming unbiased expectations, tend to amplify the patterns that would have arisen from respondents who were faced by a more neutral approach. If an interviewer's expectations are biased, such behavior may induce patterns of nonresponse that do not reflect respondents' behavior. Variation in the level of persuasive skills possessed by interviewers is clearly also an important factor, but the continuing selection of interviewers according to their completion rate should tend to dampen such differences.

Second, there is a potentially large set of decisions interviewers make during the actual administration of the interview. An interviewer's decisions whether to follow questionnaire instructions, to probe ambiguous responses, to supply important auxiliary information, to support the respondent's confidence in the confidentiality of the information, etc. are critical determinants of data quality. Typically little or nothing is known during the field period about the quality of the information collected; most often only the outcome at the grossest level—either the case was completed or it was not—is known so quickly. Thus, the selection over interviewers that does take place via performance evaluations over the field period is in a dimension not necessarily correlated with skill in collecting good information; indeed, information from the U.S. Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) suggest that there is little correlation between completion rates and data quality. The paper presents evidence from the SCF to support the importance of the two aspects of interviewers' behavior and discusses structures created for the administration of the 2004 SCF to address them.