

I'm Also a Client: Cognitive Interviewing from User and Practitioner Perspectives

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A scenario you might recognize

- ▶ In the course of testing a questionnaire, I discovered strong evidence of a problem with a particular question
- ▶ I presented:
 - The nature of the problem
 - Evidence that the problem really existed
 - A potential solution to the problem
- ▶ The results were received with interest
- ▶ And the original question was fielded in the survey, unchanged

Making sense of this situation

- ▶ Stages in my thinking:
 - **Theory 1: My evidence must not be convincing**
 - As a result, increased focus on evidence and explanation for why this problem is likely to be real and consequential
 - **Theory 2: They believe the problem, but don't have confidence in my solution**
 - Rather than thinking of blunt solutions, express it more in terms of tradeoffs between versions
 - **Theory 3: These people are idiots**
 - They don't believe in measurement error, or don't care, or are lacking in character

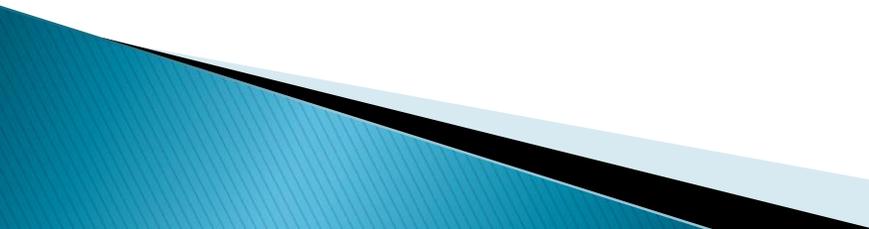
Fast forward: management meeting

- ▶ Questionnaire design decisions rest with me
- ▶ Original question will be used by default, but methodologist advised changes to wording and multiple questions
- ▶ Also in the room:
 - External sponsors (concepts)
 - Stakeholders (trends)
 - Data collection agent (costs, implementation)
 - Statisticians (imputation)
- ▶ The dilemma: measurement error vs. other concerns

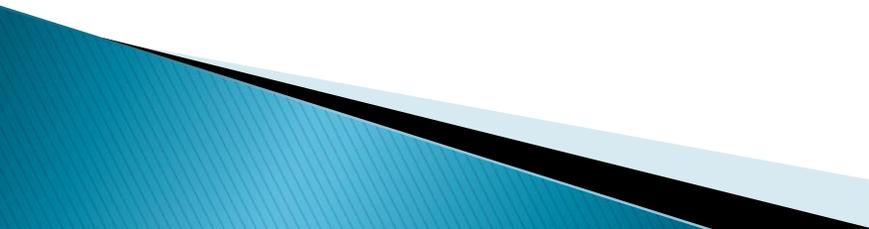
Another scenario

- ▶ Approached by an external sponsor who wanted to add a topical module to one of our surveys
 - ▶ Questions drafted but needed work
 - ▶ Cognitive interviews done through highly experienced contractor (good protocol, report, etc.)
 - ▶ We accepted the proposed questions
 - ▶ They were disastrous in the field
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What went wrong

- ▶ One of two major obstacles to the usefulness of cognitive interview findings
 - ▶ One is user-based, one is practitioner-based
 - ▶ The problem in this case was our fault: insufficient sponsor engagement
 - ▶ The overall approach:
 - Here's a questionnaire
 - Test it
 - Make it better
 - Tell us what questions to ask
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Why did it fail?

- ▶ Accepted end results uncritically
 - ▶ Didn't evaluate the end questions or actively participate in their evaluation
 - ▶ More importantly, too distant throughout the project
 - Hundreds of potential lines of investigation
 - We could have provided focus and background
 - They did improve the questions, but left many issues untouched
 - ▶ Approach fails to find key problems and ultimately minimizes the usefulness of cognitive interviewing
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Equivalent problem on the practitioner side

- ▶ Not applying findings to answer the real questions that sponsors have
 - ▶ Our key need is navigating specific decisions, choosing among various forks in the road
 - ▶ We often get rich data about how respondents interpret or answer questions... but that doesn't quite go far enough to help with these decisions
 - ▶ The gap is sometimes very significant
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Contrary arguments

- ▶ Only you know your data needs; you need to figure out how to apply results
 - Clearly, sponsors must contribute to the discussion, but without understanding the findings' implications it is unlikely to be useful
- ▶ The evidence is incomplete, and making concrete recommendations is dangerous
 - We're not that worried. Yours is a vital voice, but only one of many that determines final questions.
 - We are used to making decisions based on incomplete information
 - The risk of using no information is greater than the risk from using incomplete information

Contrary arguments (2)

- ▶ There is no evidence that directly addresses the question you raise, and our opinions alone are of little value
 - Your opinions are more valuable than you realize
 - You might have experience about related issues...
 - ... or relevant knowledge from empirical literature
 - Cognitive interviews usually don't provide truly definitive evidence, and your judgment is usually part of the analysis (and gladly accepted)
 - Are needs are very pragmatically-oriented

Final thoughts

- ▶ In recent years there's been a lot of attention to “optimizing” cognitive interviewing to make questions as error-free as possible
- ▶ This is good and well, but two other areas call out for attention:
 - Seeking generalizable lessons across questions
 - Quantifying the statistical impact of the problems you discover
- ▶ When choosing between quantifiable error and conceptual (non-quantified) error, most managers will go after the quantifiable; but the people at this meeting have much to contribute toward improving that situation