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Measuring sensitive topics, ideals and attitudes: discussant comments

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Population Data for the 21st century: Advances in data collection methodologies

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Measuring individual support and community norms for FGM: Diop

- How to measure progress in ending FGM?
  - Prevalence: Given censoring, particularly for daughters aged 0-15, survival analysis is sensible.
  - BUT: while survival curves enable us to determine temporal trends, if FGM is increasingly underreported as a result of campaigns or legal measures against practice, then observed declines may overestimate actual declines.
    - Are there innovative ways to encourage disclosure?
    - Is it feasible and ethical to validate reporting in a sub-sample?

Diop (cont'd)

- How to measure progress in ending FGM?
  - Changes in age of FGM: Is age of FGM dropping?
  - Changes in norms? Reporting of negative attitudes towards FGM may be increasing with campaigns and legal measures. But how do we know whether norms are changing or whether survey respondents are increasingly reluctant to report support for FGM?
    - Are there particular ACT indicators that are thought to be more accurately reported?
    - Are there innovative data collection tools including qualitative techniques that can capture norms around harmful practices?

Social desirability bias by mode: Kreuter

- Improving reporting of sensitive behaviors:
  - Setting context with prior questions (ask about behavior relative to friends)
  - Deliberate loading (assume sensitive behavior either by assertion prior to questions or by question wording)
- Assessing reporting of sensitive behaviors: Comparison of survey responses of U. of Maryland alumni with academic records
  - Interview mode experiments (socially desirable and undesirable characteristics of academic experiences)
    - CATI vs IVR vs Web
    - Compared: response rates, missing data, accuracy
  - Latent class analysis to identify problematic survey questions (take advantage of multiple questions assessing same indicator) – cheaper than using a gold standard

Kreuter (cont'd)

- Applicability to low income settings:
  - Setting context and deliberate loading helpful in theory, but have not solved the fundamental problem of underreporting of sensitive behaviors (Examples from my own research):
    - Unmarried adolescent girls reluctant to report sex in surveys
    - Participants in microbicide trials are reluctant to report unprotected sex and non-use of product being tested
    - Misreporting is not random
  - How do we know about underreporting? Methodological studies in SSA:
    - Interview mode experiments in Uganda & Malawi among adolescents: compared reporting of sex to biomarkers (HIV, HSV-2 & RSID -Rapid Stain Identification of Human Semen)
    - Self reports of adherence in microbicide trials among active arm participants compared to biomarkers (drug levels in plasma; residual drug in rings)
  - In sum: we have methods to assess the quality of self-reports and identify problematic questions, but lack questions and techniques to encourage disclosure of sensitive behaviors

Using card sort technique in southern Malawi: Frye

- Analyzed sex in context of relationship events using card-sort technique: comparison of realized & ideal sequences to assess family formation, & relationship well-being
- Analyzed ART priority
- Generates rich data about context and respondent attitudes about own sexual relationships:
  - Who enacts idealized patterns?
  - Which patterns are idealized but realized by few?
  - What characteristics predict distance between realized and idealized?
  - Is discrepancy between ideals and experiences associated with relationship well being (partner cares, communication, perceived HIV risk, partnership dissolution).
  - "Relationship scripts methodology dilutes the amount of energy respondents can spend on impression management."

Frye (cont'd)

- Potential limitations/concerns:
  - While embedded within a longitudinal survey, card-sort instrument administered in 5th wave only
  - Analytic samples limited to those who had sex
  - While there is underreporting of sexual ideals, is there also underreporting of premarital sex?
  - How reliable are the sequences?

- Example from my own research:
  - Comparison of sequencing using 3 life event cards: sexual initiation, school leaving, marriage in Rounds 3 & 4 of Malawi Schooling and Adolescent Survey
    - Inconsistency in reporting event sequences: e.g. of girls who reported 3 events in R3 <40% reported same sequence in R4

Studying sensitive issues with surveys: Zhou

- Summarized a body of research to improve accuracy of data generated by sensitive survey questions: reduce preference falsification (conveying preferences that are considered more socially acceptable and differ from true preference) and non-response
  - List experiment: used to measure abortion (Moseson et al. 2017 *SFP*)
  - Endorsement experiment; used to measure level of support for socially sensitive actors, e.g. Taliban
  - Randomized response experiment – using coin toss, die, spinner etc: used to measure abortion (Lara et al. 2004 *Soc. Methods & Research*)
    - Mirrored question design – randomize whether a respondent answers sensitive question or inverse
    - Forced question design – randomize whether respondent truthfully answers sensitive question or replies with a forced yes or no.

Zhou cont'd

Limitations:

- List experiments can only measure prevalence in the aggregate
- Can these methods be implemented in low literacy settings?
- Design is complicated, considerable pre-testing required : For example, for list experiment:
  - Developing an appropriate control list of non-sensitive items critical
  - Items on control list should be selected such that no respondent has experienced all of them (negative correlation across control items)
  - Control items need to be relevant to population,
  - The sensitive item shouldn't stand out
- Relies on those who are supposed to answer the question to respond truthfully
- Require large sample sizes to be adequately powered

Final thoughts

- We should continue to seek innovative ways to collect and analyze data on sensitive behavior.

- However, even the most creative methods rely on respondents' disclosure of sensitive behavior.

- Thus, efforts to develop & assess biomarkers & other more "objective" measures should continue. For example:

  - **Measurement of hormonal contraceptive use**: Population Council is conducting a proof of concept study in the Dominican Republic to measure exogenous levels of contraceptive hormones (in urine and saliva).

  - **School absenteeism:** Population Council has used community based data collectors to take school attendance 20 consecutive days per term for a Kenyan RCT assessing the provision of sanitary napkins on school attendance. Also contemplating biometric measurement; activity trackers

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