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EXPERIENCES IN TESTING QUESTIONNAIRES WITH SPECIALIZED POPULATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Statistics Canada's Questionnaire Design Resource Centre (QDRC) tests questionnaires using qualitative methods such as focus groups and cognitive interviews to ensure that questionnaires collect accurate information and are interviewer- and respondent-friendly. The QDRC has extensive experience testing questionnaires with specialized populations such as Aboriginal people, homosexuals and bisexuals, children and youth, seniors, victims of abuse and people with specific health problems. Testing questionnaires with respondents in these specialized populations presents challenges that are not seen with the general population with respect to identifying and recruiting respondents; determining the most appropriate testing methodology, location and timing of testing; and creating respondent rapport and trust. This paper discusses the challenges faced and strategies used by the QDRC to conduct questionnaire testing with these specialized populations.

KEYWORDS: Cognitive Interviews; Focus Groups; Qualitative Testing; Recruiting.

1. INTRODUCTION

Questionnaires are a vital component of the data collection process at Statistics Canada. A well-developed questionnaire can improve the accuracy of the data collected, minimize response burden, and lead to a reduction in the cost and time associated with data collection and processing. Therefore, the review and testing of questionnaires plays a crucial role in the survey development process.

Statistics Canada's *Policy on the Review and Testing of Questionnaires* states that all new and revised questionnaires should be evaluated "in terms of satisfying users' information requirements; consistency with standard concepts and definitions; nature of the respondent population, including considerations such as literacy level, the use of specialized language and record-keeping practices; data quality, particularly response and nonresponse errors; response burden; respondent-friendliness; interviewer-friendliness." (Statistics Canada, 2002)

The Questionnaire Design Resource Centre (QDRC) is the focal point of expertise and experience at Statistics Canada for questionnaire design and evaluation. The QDRC provides several services to internal and external clients including: consultation on questionnaire design; guidance and advice on the testing of questionnaires; planning and coordinating questionnaire testing activities; testing questionnaires using qualitative and cognitive methods; and provision of guidelines and training on questionnaire design and testing.

1.1 Overview of Questionnaire Testing

Questionnaire testing begins with planning the testing strategy. The QDRC, in consultation with members of the survey team, decides on the testing methodology to be employed, the number of participants, the location of testing and the timing of the testing. These decisions depend on the goals of the testing, the length of the questionnaire, the method of administration, characteristics of the population of interest, the survey content and regional variation.

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Once the testing methodology has been determined, members of the population of interest are identified and recruited for testing. Depending on the survey needs, individuals with specific characteristics of interest (e.g. sex, age, work status) are targeted. Most often, participants are recruited from lists of members of the population of interest. Potential participants are contacted by a professional recruiter, asked screening questions and, if they fit the desired profile, invited to attend the testing. Participants are provided with honorariums to encourage and thank them for their participation. Honorarium amounts typically range from \$40 to \$100 per person, depending on the nature of the population and the difficulty in ensuring their attendance. In a few cases, where a cash honorarium is not considered appropriate (for example, for business survey respondents), other forms of incentives are used. However, the rapport between the recruiter and the participants is usually a more important factor in encouraging participation.

The next step is to administer the questionnaire or parts of the questionnaire that are being tested. Every effort is made to administer the questionnaire in the same manner that it will be administered in the field (self-completed, interviewer administered, telephone interview, computer-assisted, etc.). This can be done either in advance of the testing or at the time of testing. Ideally, the questionnaire is administered as close as possible to the testing so it is fresh in the respondent's mind.

Once the questionnaire has been administered, questionnaire testing can take place. Focus groups and cognitive interviews are the most common methods of questionnaire testing. "A focus group is a discussion of a selected topic by participants who are chosen from the population of interest." (Statistics Canada, 2003, *Survey Methods and Practices*) A focus group is led by a moderator and delves into survey content, general feelings about the questionnaire or question wording that has been identified in advance as being potentially problematic. Focus groups are conducted in facilities with audio- (and sometimes video-) recording and a one-way mirror for observation by team members. A cognitive interview is a one-on-one discussion between a moderator and a test participant. The participant is asked to comment on each question, explaining how the final response was chosen. Respondents are asked follow-up or debriefing questions to examine their reactions to the questionnaire and their understanding of terms and concepts. An observer is usually present to take notes and provide background information if needed. Cognitive interviews are conducted in the participant's home, place of work or focus group facilities. Every effort is made to maintain the rapport that was created during recruiting by providing some time at the beginning of the focus group or interview for introductions and for discussion of the goals of the testing and the process to be followed.

After testing is completed, the results are summarized in a report that includes recommendations for improvements to the questionnaire. At this stage, further testing may be planned in order to test revisions to the questionnaire.

Each testing project is unique and must be customized to a certain extent. This is especially true when conducting testing with very specialized populations. Specialized populations can present challenges in locating and recruiting respondents, the selection of incentives, the testing methodology selected, the location and timing of testing, and creating rapport and trust. These issues will be discussed with respect to the experience of the QDRC with specialized populations.

2. EXPERIENCES WITH SPECIALIZED POPULATIONS

The QDRC has extensive experience testing questionnaires with specialized populations, for example: Aboriginal people; homosexuals and bisexuals; children and youth; seniors; victims of abuse; and people with specific health problems. The challenges faced and strategies used by the QDRC to conduct questionnaire testing with these specialized populations will be discussed.

2.1 Aboriginal people

Conducting questionnaire testing with Aboriginal people presents some unique challenges. Aboriginal people feel that they are studied too much. This creates a great reluctance to participate in surveys. Aboriginal people living on reserves may be difficult to reach because they live in areas that are geographically remote and often have a low rate

of telephone coverage. The distinct Aboriginal cultures and traditions can sometimes result in miscommunication with survey collectors. Finally, a serious mistrust of government can strain relations between survey takers and Aboriginal respondents. In order to address these issues, it is essential to be respectful towards Aboriginal culture and traditions; to use correct terminology; to be aware of relevant historical events; and to conduct research as a partnership. (Statistics Canada, 2003, "Diversity and Awareness: Building Effective Relationships with Aboriginal People") These issues will be discussed through an example of questionnaire testing conducted by the QDRC.

As part of the Aboriginal Data Initiative, Statistics Canada is assessing the feasibility of conducting an ongoing survey program for all Aboriginal groups: Inuit, Métis and North American Indian - including the reserve population. Some of the main goals are to produce work, income and education indicators that are comparable to existing data but still relevant to Aboriginal people, to recognize the importance of traditional Aboriginal activities and to try to minimize North American cultural bias with respect to these statistics. In order to ensure the survey data are relevant to Aboriginal people, Statistics Canada consulted with Aboriginal people living on reserves very early in the questionnaire design process, seeking input on the survey topics and on question wording as well as to find out their priorities and uses for the data.

Several focus groups were conducted to obtain feedback from respondents on their reactions to proposed content and questions. Two urban centres located close to several reserves were selected for the focus groups. This allowed participants from several reserves to attend the focus groups and eliminated the issue of having to obtain permission to access the reserves. Focus groups were conducted in hotel conference rooms as opposed to focus group facilities with one-way mirrors because it was felt that the process should be as transparent as possible to engender trust. The focus groups were held on weekend days to ensure that people who work during the week could attend. In each location, one focus group was conducted with women and one was conducted with men since it was felt that they may have very different views on unpaid and traditional work.

Recruitment was a challenge because of the difficulty in making contact with potential participants due to the lack of a frame, low telephone coverage, geographic remoteness and mistrust of government. Aboriginal firms with extensive experience recruiting Aboriginal people were selected to conduct recruiting to promote trust and rapport with participants. The recruiters contacted band offices, Aboriginal organizations and employment centres on reserves to ask for names of potential participants. These participants were then contacted by telephone and administered the screening questionnaire. Participants without telephones were given some information about the testing by their band office or employment centre and then were asked to call the recruiters from work or from a public telephone if they were interested in participating. The recruiters targeted people with a wide variety of work status (employed, unemployed, homemaker, working in traditional activities). Elders and chiefs were excluded since it was felt that others might defer to their opinions. An honorarium of \$50 was provided in addition to \$50 for travel expenses because of the long distances that many participants had to travel to the focus groups.

To increase cultural sensitivity, the moderator studied correct terminology and relevant historical events before testing took place. Great care was taken in creating the moderator's guide to ensure that the terminology was respectful and to make clear that the goal was to incorporate the opinions of Aboriginal people in the survey process. To further improve rapport, a non-Aboriginal moderator and an Aboriginal member of the survey team were paired to conduct the focus groups. The Aboriginal team member introduced the survey, provided background information and helped wrap-up the discussion at the end of the focus group while the non-Aboriginal moderator facilitated the discussion of the questionnaire. This method seemed to engender trust and to get people talking. Since it was felt that respondents might be uncomfortable with audio-recording the sessions, the observers took extensive notes and each participant was asked if they were comfortable with recording the discussion before starting the focus group. Finally, the moderator offered to send a summary of the findings to participants who were interested in receiving the results of the testing. A large number of participants were interested.

Attendance at the focus groups was excellent, probably due to the rapport between the recruiters and the participants. Participants mentioned that they felt much more comfortable having an Aboriginal person involved in the focus group. However, participants still expressed a lot of suspicion and resentment towards the government. This lessened (but did not disappear) after explaining the background of the project, the confidentiality of data collected and that data would not be used by other government departments as a means to check up on people.

Despite their suspicions, participants appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback and many thought that two hours was too short a time for the discussion.

2.2 Homosexuals and bisexuals

On various occasions, the QDRC has tested survey questions on sexual orientation and relationships within households, where it was necessary to test questionnaires not only with persons who were heterosexual but also with persons who were homosexual or bisexual. One of these projects tested a question on sexual orientation in the context of three household surveys: the General Social Survey (GSS) on Time Use, the General Social Survey (GSS) on Safety and Victimization and the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS). The testing explored the feasibility of asking a question on sexual orientation, whether respondents saw a logical fit between a question on sexual orientation and the subject matter of the survey, and whether they were willing to answer the question. As part of the project, cognitive interviews took place with persons selected from the gay and lesbian community and with respondents selected from the general population, regardless of sexual orientation.

Gay and lesbian participants were identified by contacting gay and lesbian associations and other community groups and through referrals. Special care was taken to ensure that leaders or activists in the gay and lesbian community were not recruited. During recruiting, it was explained that the interview would be conducted to test questions on sexual orientation. Recruiting was very successful, and all participants who were recruited from the gay and lesbian community participated in the testing. Further, respondents were recruited so as to get representation of a variety of living situations: living alone, living with a partner, living with family, and living with friends.

During the cognitive interviews, respondents were interviewed in a focus group room to increase the sense of anonymity. Establishing rapport between the QDRC consultant and the respondent was very important in ensuring that the respondent would feel comfortable. To do this, the QDRC consultant had a friendly chat with the respondent, provided a brief introduction about the purpose of the study and emphasized the anonymity of the interview prior to entering the focus group room. This initial discussion sometimes lasted as long as 10 or 15 minutes. Once seated in the focus group room, further explanations were provided: that the session was being audio-recorded and that observers were present behind the one-way mirror.

Three variations of a question on sexual orientation and associated response categories were tested in the context of the three household surveys. To simulate the actual administration of the surveys, the QDRC consultant administered the CCHS as a face-to-face interview in the focus group room and the two GSS surveys by telephone from the observation room while the respondent remained in the focus group room. Although the order of administering the questionnaires was rotated among respondents, the CCHS questionnaire was generally administered first to make the respondent feel more comfortable before they were left on their own in the focus group room. Following the administration of the questionnaires, respondents were interviewed in-depth about their reactions to the questions and response categories, their preferences and their understanding of terminology.

This approach to testing the question on sexual orientation worked very well. Due to the rapport and the assurances of anonymity that were established at the outset, respondents felt very comfortable with the interviewing arrangements, were willing to reveal personal details about their lives, answered questions honestly and provided many useful insights into the issues being investigated.

2.3 Children and youth

Many of Statistics Canada's surveys involve collecting information from minors. This population presents its own challenges when undertaking questionnaire testing activities. In the past years, the QDRC has used both cognitive interview and focus group techniques to test questionnaires for the National Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) and the Youth Smoking Survey (YSS).

Obtaining the consent of the child's parent is essential. Recruiters will typically speak with the parent first, explain the purpose of the questionnaire test and obtain consent from the parent. They may also ask some screening questions which may be better answered by the parent (household income, for example). Then the recruiter will ask

to speak to the child, get the child's agreement to take part and ask the remaining screening questions. In the case of the Youth Smoking Survey, an extra difficulty was added to the recruiting process. Since it was desired to include some youth smokers in the test, recruiters had to obtain a sensitive piece of information (that is, whether or not the child smoked) without risking disclosing this information to the child's parents. Parents were not told on what basis their child had been chosen to participate in the test. They were only told about the survey topic, and permission to speak to the child was requested. This method was effective, and no incidents of sensitive information disclosure occurred.

Most parents, when their child participates in a consultation such as a cognitive interview or a focus group, will stay and wait until the end of the activity. Therefore an appropriate waiting area is important. Parents appreciate having reading material to occupy themselves. Information on how the focus group or interview with their child will be conducted, about the survey in general or about the survey organization, can be especially useful in maintaining a good rapport with the respondents' parents.

Typically, the amount of honorariums will be less for children than for adults. Usually, \$40 will suffice when the child is asked to go to a facility for a two-hour focus group. However, in some cases, there are concerns about giving children money and how they might choose to spend it. For example, when testing the Youth Smoking Survey, it was thought that the smoking participants might (or might be perceived to) spend the money on cigarettes. When it is thought that cash honorariums may not be appropriate, children and youth are offered gift certificates to a local bookstore or music store instead. Experience has shown that these are much appreciated.

When using cognitive interviews to test a questionnaire for children and youth, it is necessary to plan for more interviews than for adult surveys, for two reasons. First, children and youth surveys typically use multiple versions of a questionnaire to adapt it to the various age groups (versions for younger children will use simpler wording, while those for older respondents may delve deeper into sensitive topics like drugs and sexuality). Each version of the questionnaire will require its own critical mass of test respondents, resulting in a larger number of interviews overall. Second, many children will provide a limited number of comments in a one-on-one setting since they may be shy in the presence of an adult stranger, or they may not be at ease critiquing the questionnaire (the comment "it's fine" is heard quite often).

Focus groups can be an effective way to test questionnaires with children. However, special attention must be paid to group dynamics. In some cases, in a group setting with others of their own age, children become very talkative. They will discuss issues, agree/disagree with other participants, etc. as long as they are instructed to do so in plain words. While many focus groups with adult participants take time to "warm up," the opposite may be true for groups of children: the group can sometimes become too lively. At these times, the moderator requires the skill to hold the discipline within the group and keep it focused on the task at hand, not unlike a schoolteacher. On the other hand, depending on the subject matter and how comfortable the children are with the moderator, they sometimes offer little information. If this is the case, it is crucial to work on trust and rapport and to reassure participants that their opinions are important and valid. Also, since some children and youth may be vulnerable to peer pressure, they need to be reminded at times that they are allowed to disagree with the rest of the group.

In some focus group facilities, microphones are installed on the table rather than the ceiling. When that is the case, microphones can pick up a lot of noise caused by participants' movement, making it more difficult for observers to hear the discussion and making the quality of the audio recording suffer. This occurs sometimes in adult focus groups, but is more typical of groups involving children and youth. On one occasion, the children were offered some candy during the focus group. As a result, the sound of candy wrappers being torn and wrinkled made it very difficult for observers to hear, and the audio-recording was not of much use. The moderator had to rely mostly on his own memory to report the group's findings. This illustrates why participants sometimes need to be reminded to avoid making noise near the microphones. When choosing a facility for focus groups with children, the location of the microphones should be a factor to consider.

Good rapport with respondents is critical to the success of questionnaire testing with children and youth. The interviewer or moderator must be able to create and maintain trust with the child. Experience in dealing with children (parenting, teaching, etc.) is a valuable asset. It is also necessary to explain to the child the role of the survey organization and what the survey is about. It is usually assumed that adult respondents know what Statistics

Canada and surveys are, but the same assumption cannot be made for children. The introductory chat should therefore be used as an opportunity to present the survey organization and show the respondent the context of the testing activity. Often the question "Have you ever heard of Statistics Canada?" is a very good conversation starter.

2.4 Seniors

The QDRC has done extensive testing with seniors for surveys such as the Canadian Health Measures Survey, Joint Canada United States Health Survey, the Census of Population and various cycles of the General Social Survey. (Generally, the QDRC defines a senior as someone 55 years of age and older. This criterion may change from one testing project to another.) Testing survey questions with seniors can present some challenges, different from those involved in testing questions with the general population.

The first challenge in conducting questionnaire testing with seniors is the recruitment of participants. Seniors can be very suspicious when contacted by telephone by strangers. Since recruitment for QDRC testing projects is almost exclusively conducted by telephone, this suspicion is often an obstacle. The approach used by the recruiter is extremely important. The recruiter must quickly develop a rapport with the potential test participant and gain some level of trust. Usually, recruiters who employ a friendly yet professional approach are most successful. Mentioning the fact that Statistics Canada or the Government of Canada is conducting the research helps legitimize the reason for calling. Seniors tend to have a higher level of trust and greater respect for the Government than others in the general population. Once a level of trust is attained through providing pertinent information, seniors are often willing to participate. In fact, they are frequently more willing to participate than the general population. As well, seniors are generally more reliable in terms of attending focus groups and cognitive interviews.

Another challenge that can be present during the recruitment of seniors is ensuring that the potential participant is capable of taking part in testing. Along with ensuring that the potential participant meets the criteria for a given study, recruiters must make sure that the potential participant is physically and mentally capable of participating. Recruiters may ask additional questions of seniors to make sure that they do not have any limitations that might prevent them from fully participating in the testing. In addition, participants over the age of 75 are not generally recruited due to potential limitations.

The next challenge to testing with seniors concerns scheduling focus groups and cognitive interviews. Typically focus groups with the general population are conducted during the evening. For seniors this is not the best time because they maintain a somewhat earlier day-to-day schedule than others. Therefore, fatigue can be a factor as seniors may not be at their most alert during an evening focus group. As well, due to security concerns, many seniors are uncomfortable leaving their homes or accepting strangers into their homes in the evening. For these reasons, focus groups and cognitive interviews with seniors are most often scheduled during the morning or early afternoon.

Another challenge can be the location of the testing. As with all test populations, conducting cognitive interviews in the participant's home is usually most convenient. However, many seniors have security concerns. They simply may not be willing to participate in testing if it involves welcoming a stranger into their home. On the other hand, seniors may have concerns about traveling to a facility if it is located in a busy downtown location or in an area where personal safety is a concern. Therefore, when conducting cognitive interviews with seniors, test participants are often given the option of holding the interview at their home or at a more public location that is convenient for both the participant and the interviewer. Ease of access by public transit or by personal automobile as well as parking that is safe, convenient and economical can also be important factors in choosing the best location.

Questionnaire testing with seniors can present another difficult situation. At the time of recruitment, a senior may be very willing to participate, and an appointment for a cognitive interview or focus group may be scheduled. However, when a family member, perhaps someone who is responsible for providing care to the participant, becomes aware of the scheduled appointment, he or she may try to prevent the respondent from participating. This family member may be somewhat protective of the participant, particularly if the participant has health problems. In this situation, the recruitment task is twice as difficult. The recruiter must first get through any barriers with the potential participants and then do the same thing with a member of the participant's family.

The criteria for choosing a methodology to test questionnaires do not really change for the senior population. The strengths and weaknesses of focus groups and cognitive interviews are consistent across populations. However, the QDRC does not generally mix seniors with other age groups in focus groups. Seniors can have difficulty participating in focus groups comprised of mixed ages. This may be because their interests are different from younger people or because they prefer to discuss fewer topics in more detail rather than covering many topics. Therefore, the QDRC usually conducts focus groups comprised of only seniors especially if seniors comprise a significant portion of the population of interest. Not only is their participation enhanced in this environment but their wisdom becomes evident.

Focus groups involving seniors tend to be quite lively. Given the chance, seniors usually have a lot to say. Sometimes the moderator must make an extra effort to keep the discussions on track with the topic of discussion. The moderator may also find it challenging to wrap up the discussions. Occasionally seniors will be resistant to a focus group or cognitive interview ending. Some seniors may enjoy, and in fact have a need for, the social contact that questionnaire testing provides. This is one of the reasons that the honorarium is provided at the end of the focus group - as a way to clearly end the discussion.

2.5 Victims of violence and abuse

Testing of the 1999 and 2004 General Social Surveys (GSS) on Victimization presented unique challenges due to the sensitivity of questions on family violence and abuse. The main goal of the testing was to determine the appropriateness of new survey concepts and question wording, especially questions about spousal violence and abuse and senior abuse on the 1999 GSS and questions about family violence on the 2004 GSS. A combination of focus groups with members of the general population and cognitive interviews with victims of violence and abuse were used to test the questionnaires for both surveys.

During the testing of the 1999 GSS, the cognitive interviews focused on persons who had been victims of spousal violence or abuse and on seniors who had been victims of senior abuse. The recruitment of women was done through transition homes and second-stage housing. Men were recruited through men's support groups, while seniors were recruited through agencies and associations that had senior abuse programs. For the 2004 GSS, the cognitive interviews focused on persons who had been victims of family violence or abuse, including childhood victimization. These persons were recruited by contacting victims' services organizations or groups that provide services to people who were currently or had been victims of violence or abuse.

To recruit the respondents, coordinators of the various facilities and programs were contacted. The purpose of the survey and testing, as well as the testing process, was explained to them. The coordinators and program leaders approached their past clients and persons who were currently receiving counselling and forwarded the names of people who agreed to take part in the testing. This approach was generally successful in recruiting victims of violence and abuse. The main difficulty encountered in recruiting participants for the 1999 GSS testing was that it was not possible to recruit men who had experienced physical violence by a spouse. During the 2004 GSS testing, there was some difficulty in finding victims of abuse who were willing to participate, in particular men.

The use of cognitive interviews with respondents who had been victims of violent or abusive relationships provided an appropriate environment in which to meet with these respondents due to the sensitivity of the questions. The interviews provided privacy and enabled the QDRC consultant to develop a rapport with each respondent. This rapport was very important because of the requirement for in-depth questioning and follow-up probing of emotionally difficult experiences. (Paletta, 1999)

To prepare for the interviews during the 1999 GSS testing, sensitivity training was provided to the QDRC consultants and the telephone interviewers by a professional psychologist whose area of expertise was family violence and abuse. This training focused on sensitization to cues that would indicate when a respondent may be experiencing distress, and how to respond if this occurred. The training also focused on how to identify cues that the respondent was unwilling to discuss an incident that had occurred or that may still be occurring, for example if they were distressed or concerned about being overheard by someone else in the household. (Paletta, 1999)

Due to the subject matter of the survey, it was important to ensure that the QDRC consultants and interviewers be provided with special support should it be required. Thus, the psychologist who had conducted the sensitivity training was made available to the QDRC consultants and interviewers on an individual basis for support following any particularly difficult interview. This support allowed the consultants and interviewers to continue to maintain a professional approach at all times by providing a mechanism to aid them with any problems that they may have experienced during the testing due to disclosures of violence and abuse. (Paletta, 1999)

For the testing of the 2004 GSS, the QDRC consultants and telephone interviewers attended a sensitivity training session prior to the study. The session was provided by Statistics Canada's Employment Assistance Program (EAP) and covered issues that were similar to the training during the 1999 GSS testing. The session provided the consultants and interviewers with an understanding of the issues that they might encounter. Again, consultants and interviewers could approach EAP staff for support if it were necessary.

Another special consideration in testing with victims of violence and abuse is providing support to respondents. During both the 1999 GSS and 2004 GSS testing, respondent support was facilitated by compiling a list of community services available to respondents in their community in the event that a respondent was looking for advice from the interviewer, or if the respondent became upset during the interview while disclosing an incident of violence or abuse. This is needed in this type of testing since the QDRC consultants and telephone interviewers are not trained counsellors but may need to provide support to a respondent. The lists of community services allowed them to provide access to support services should it be considered necessary during an interview.

This special preparation for consultants and interviewers was worthwhile. This was indicated, for example, by participants who commented that they found the interviewer's tone of voice to be very sensitive. They appreciated that the interviewers took their time asking the more sensitive questions and listened to what the respondent was saying. Respondents found that this helped them feel comfortable about talking about their painful experiences. From their point of view, interviewers felt that it was comforting to know that the psychologist was available to them if needed, and that it was important to have an external resource to talk to directly.

2.6 People with health problems

Statistics Canada conducts a number of health surveys, some of which target populations with specific health problems. Questionnaire testing for these surveys can present special challenges.

Recruiting people with specific diseases can sometimes be difficult due to their rarity. In these cases, the recruiting may have to be done within specific institutions or organizations who deal with the population of interest. Obtaining cooperation from these organizations is critical to successful recruitment of the participants. This can be done by effectively presenting the survey objective and the advantages of participating.

Some of the challenges associated with seniors (as noted in the previous section) can also be encountered when testing questionnaires with participants who have health problems or disabilities. Extra efforts should be taken to ensure that the recruited individual is capable of participating in the test in a useful manner. The test location must be convenient and accessible to participants (wheelchairs sometimes have to be accommodated). Protective family members may have to be convinced to let their sick or disabled relative participate in the test. And, as with seniors, a more productive discussion may result if participants are not mixed with participants from the general population since their viewpoints may be very different.

People suffering from mental health problems can present other challenges for questionnaire testers. In 2001, the QDRC tested two questionnaires on Mental Health for the Canadian Community Health Survey. One questionnaire asked about various mental disorders such as depression, panic attacks, phobias, anxiety, etc. The other questionnaire focused on post-traumatic stress disorder and asked about traumatic events in the respondent's life and emotional effects such as flashbacks. For both questionnaires, the testing was faced with issues similar to those described in Section 2.4 (Victims of violence and abuse). Interviewers had to display acute sensitivity to respondents' situations and problems, and needed support to be able to deal with the difficult situations described by respondents.

Finally, when testing questionnaires with people with health problems it is possible that participants may not have the physical or mental stamina to complete the testing. Questionnaire testing is often time-consuming and may be mentally or physically exhausting for someone who is ill. The moderator should be sensitive to any distress on the part of the participant and be prepared to cut short the interview at any time.

3. CONCLUSION

Specialized populations present unique challenges in questionnaire testing. Standard questionnaire testing practices that usually work for the general population need to be adapted or modified to ensure the success of testing activities with these populations. When planning cognitive interviews or focus groups, it is advisable to take into account the characteristics of the participants desired for the test. If they are from a specialized population (whether one of the populations covered by this paper, or some other population), then more information should be gathered about this population to determine what special measures should be taken to facilitate the recruiting, interviewing and/or focus groups, and logistics associated with questionnaire testing.

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