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by Michael R. Elliott

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Comments on "Exploring the assumption that commercial online nonprobability survey respondents are answering in good faith"

Michael R. Elliott[1]

Abstract

Kennedy, Mercer, and Lau explore misreporting by respondents in non-probability samples and discover a new feature, namely that of deliberate misreporting of demographic characteristics. This finding suggests that the "arms race" between researchers and those determined to disrupt the practice of social science is not over and researchers need to account for such respondents if using high-quality probability surveys to help reduce error in non-probability samples.

Key Words: Misreporting; Demographics; Benchmarking.

Kennedy, Mercer, and Lau (KML) are to be commended for an excellent article discussing an underappreciated problem with non-probability samples: the presence of bogus respondents. While theirs is not the only discussion of this topic – Jamieson, Lupia, Amaya, Brady, Bautista, Clinton, Dever, Dutwin, Goroff, Hillygus, Kennedy, Langer, Lapinski, Link, Philpot, Prewitt, Rivers, Vavreck, Wilson and McNutt, 2023 note evidence of similar respondents in studies of ingesting bleach to protect against COVID-19 (Litman, Rosen, Hartman, Rosenzweig, Weinberger-Litman, Moss and Robinson, 2023), belief in conspiracies like PizzaGate (Lopez and Hillygus, 2018), support of political violence (Westwood, Grimmer, Tyler and Nall, 2022), or favorable views of Vladimir Putin (Kennedy, Hatley, Lau, Mercer, Keeter, Ferno and Asare-Marfo, 2021) – they further highlight the intensity of the problem and discover a new facet: intentional misreporting of basic demographics. This latter point is quite important as these quantities, which are often known reasonably accurately for populations of interest from the US Census or other government survey sources, are often used for calibration, to mitigate selection and/or non-response bias.

I and others have advocated for careful and continued funding of a set of major high quality surveys to serve as benchmarks to calibrate non-probability surveys (Wu, 2022). KML suggest such studies might also need to include measures to help detect bogus respondents, in addition to whatever steps might be taken to directly identify such respondents in the non-probability survey itself, such as inclusion of bogus identification questions (Petzel, Johnson and McKillip, 1973; Chandler, Rosenzweig, Moss, Robinson and Litman, 2019). Given that non-probability surveys can easily become the target of individuals trying to influence study outcomes for a wide variety of reasons, we have probably not seen the last of this growing "arms race" between researchers and those determined to disrupt the practice of social science.

1. Michael R. Elliott, Department of Biostatistics, University of Michigan, M4124 SPH II, 1415 Washington Heights, Ann Arbor, MI 48109. E-mail: mrelliot@umich.edu.

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