

How to (possibly) Ask for Parental Permission to Interview a Teenager: A Telephone Experiment in the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS)

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Abstract

One challenge of interviewing adolescents is obtaining parental consent. This can be particularly difficult in telephone surveys where parents have no personal connection with the researchers. The California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) has experienced a decline in adolescent response rate over the past 10 years due primarily to declining parental permission rates. In an attempt to counter this trend, focus groups were conducted with parents to get a better understanding of their concerns. From that feedback, an experiment was designed, which changed the way permission was requested. The randomized experiment manipulated a) the verbatim consent script read to parents and b) instructions to interviewers to tailor responses to parents' questions and concerns. The revised verbatim consent used plainer and friendlier language without changing any of the substantive information about the interview or research risks. The tailoring instructions asked interviewers to listen for concerns that parents express about the teen interview and respond in ways that answer those questions and motivate them to provide permission. The new permission script significantly increased the rate at which parents grant permission to interview the adolescent. Instructions to tailor response to parents' questions seemed to have no additional positive effect and may have negatively affected permission rates when combined with the new consent script. The overall effects seem to be driven by differences in Spanish interviews but not English interviews, suggesting that either translation or cultural expectations regarding parental requests for adolescent participation may influence parental consent rates. The findings contribute to our understanding of methods to include minors in population-based survey, and language differences in survey consent and participation.

1.0 Introduction

The California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) is a random-digit dial (RDD) telephone survey of the California household population. Within each household, one adult, one child, and one teen are selected for data collection. The adult and child interviews are conducted with adults in the household, but the teen interview is conducted with teens directly. This interview is for household members who are under the legal guardianship of the sample adult and are 12-17 years old. Being minors, their participation requires parental (i.e., guardian¹) permission. CHIS obtains that permission while on the phone with the adult by reading an IRB-approved script. This paper focuses on the process of asking for permission to interview teens and the results of an experiment that modified the script used and tailored feedback that interviewers could provide.

CHIS has seen a decline in final teen response rate over the years, and it seems to be due primarily to a decline in obtaining parental permission to talk to their teens. When parents give consent to interview their teens, teens are likely to participate themselves (72% in 2011), but obtaining parents' permission can be tough (60% of parents with eligible teens gave permission in 2011).

Several factors likely cause parents' reluctance to give permission. We conducted focus groups with parents of teens sampled in CHIS, some of whom gave permission for the teen interview and some who did not. Focus groups contained parents of various ages, family constellations, and genders. Some parents had younger teens and some had older teens. The discussions elucidated a variety of reasons for granting or denying participation. Parents cited participating in scientific research for the greater good, offering a chance to interact with an adult on the phone in an "official" capacity, and using the interview as a bridge to open discussion with their teen about health issues as reasons for granting permission. Those who denied permission cited concerns about privacy, the content of the interview, and their child's busy school and activity schedule. While focus group results are far from representative and systematic, we heard some evidence that parents of younger teens were less likely to grant permission than parents of older teens. In one or two particularly memorable cases, fathers of young daughters had strong opinions about preventing their daughters from talking to a stranger on the phone about personal topics.

We also coded interviewer notes about parents' concerns about teen permission. This showed that the most common parent concerns were very general (e.g., "not enough time" or "just uncomfortable"), similar to findings about doorstep concerns (Dahlhamer, Simile, & Taylor, 2006). As a result we consider tailoring as a part of the experiment to encourage interviewers to try to listen for parents' true concerns and respond with relevant answers (Groves, Singer, & Corning, 2000).

Another strong theme that came through in the focus groups was that the permission script seemed cold and uninviting, and distanced the parent from the permission process. Our original permission script started with the phrase "[CHILD NAME] has been selected. . .," which at least one parent said made it feel like the process was already completed and we just needed her to get out of the way so we could conduct interview with her child.

After witnessing these focus groups and reviewing interviewer notes, we asked ourselves, "Can we write a better consent script and consent protocol?" We decided to conduct an experiment manipulating two features of the permission-asking process: the verbatim script that is read to parents, and the ability of the interviewer to tailor their responses to parents' questions.

¹ For this survey's purposes, the permission-giving adult must be the legal guardian of the sampled teen. Those are usually also the biological or adoptive parents of the teen, so we use the term "parent" to refer to all "permission-giving adults." Foster children are considered wards of the state and are not eligible to be sampled when living with a foster parent.

2.0 Methods

Table 1 shows the major differences in wording between the original and modified consent scripts. Most notable is that the modified script is about 60 words shorter and has re-arranged or re-worded text to sound more inviting to parents and more respecting of their role in the permission process. Interviewers were assigned to read either the original script or the modified script.

Table 1. Comparison of Original and Modified Permission Scripts (points of note in bold)

<i>Original</i>	<i>Modified</i>
297 words	236 words
Selection: “Johnny has been selected for the study.”	Selection: “We would like to interview Johnny for our study.”
Mode implied. Time mentioned toward end of script	“...It’s a phone interview and should take him about 15 minutes to do it.”
Intro: Jumps right into script after selection notice	Intro: “...There’s some text that I’m required to read to you first so I’ll do that, and then you can ask me any questions you have.”
Questions: Mentions topics, but no direct comparison to parent’s experience	Questions: “...like the ones you answered, but it is much shorter... ”
Privacy: “...We make every effort to protect Johnny’s information.”	Privacy: “...Johnny’s answers are kept strictly confidential... ”
Extra Verbiage: “Also, we believe that young people tend to feel more comfortable doing the interview when their parents are not in the same room listening.”	Extra Verbiage: Removed from script. Added at phone transition or callback.

To manipulate interviewers’ ability to tailor, we produced a set of scripts that interviewers could use when encountered with common concerns that parents have about granting permission. For example, if a parent expressed concern about how long the interview would take, the interviewer could explain that it only takes 15 minutes on average. These phrases were available to interviewers in the form of a physical reference sheet that was given to them with instructions about how to use them in the permission experiment. UCLA IRB, California State IRB, and Westat’s Human Subjects Review Board each approved the study protocol, revised verbatim permission script, and tailoring scripts.

The experimental manipulations create a 2 x 2 factorial experiment design as described below. Interviewers were randomized into 4 conditions, blocked by historical cooperation rates and language. The experiment was only carried out in English and Spanish. The experimental conditions were:

- a. Original permission script, no tailoring (Control)
- b. New permission script, no tailoring
- c. Original permission script, tailoring allowed
- d. New permission script, tailoring allowed

2.1 Implementation

The experiment ran from 9/8/13 through 12/15/13 in production CHIS. Over this period, 958 calls went through the experiment, representing 783 HHs and 101 interviewers (i.e., 1.22 calls/HH, 7.75 HHs per interviewer).

Four major call dispositions are relevant for this analysis. The unweighted percentage of calls falling into each disposition category is shown for the sample overall (English and Spanish) and for Spanish interviews separately. Overall Spanish interviews seem to be more agreeable than the overall (and thus more than English).

Table 2. Disposition Rates Overall and for Spanish

<i>Disposition</i>	<i>% Overall</i>	<i>% Spanish</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Permission Given	52%	56%	This is our ideal outcome. Over half of calls end in this disposition, with Spanish interviews being a little more likely to give permission than the overall mean.
Appointment (general and specific)	25%	33%	Appointments can be interpreted as good or bad depending on the motivation behind them. Spanish interviews seem to be more likely to end in an appointment than the overall average.
Permission Denied	11%	4%	Denying permission occurs when the parent hears the permission script and says “No”. Spanish interviews are much less likely to end in this disposition.
Refusal	12%	7%	Parents are coded as refusal when they say “No” before hearing the permission script. Spanish speakers are less likely than the overall average to refuse outright.

Polite refusals disguised as appointments are a negative disposition. They give us incomplete information about the true status of the household and give us little to work with in follow-up calls. The only benefit of receiving such a disposition over a clear refusal is that they stay active in the primary queue instead of being moved to a refusal conversion queue or finalized as a refusal. However, if they are latent refusals, it could be desirable to have that status coded explicitly so we can deal with them appropriately.

Appointments that are honest attempts to try to reschedule (e.g., “I need to talk to my wife” or “Call me back tomorrow at 2:30 when I can give you my full attention”), are positive results. We can distinguish between soft and firm appointments in our data, but not the intension behind the appointment. Listening to and coding the recordings of the exchanges between parents and interviewers might reveal more insights about the nature of the refusals.

Respondents coded as “permission denied” have heard the informed consent script and deny permission. These are “bad” responses for us, but are at least informed because the parent listened to consent and said “No”. Refusals are simply bad dispositions, and thus they receive the lowest level in our disposition ranking. Respondents who refuse made the decision without having full information about the survey. In our monitoring during data collection, one parent was close to refusal when the interviewer interrupted (appropriately) and clarified that the teen interview would be done with the teen directly (not the parent). After hearing that, the parent was quick to approve, since she had initially assumed that it was another interview she had to do herself (sample adult and sample child are often completed by the same person).

3.0 Results

This analysis was conducted with a call-level data file (n = 958 calls). Thus, some households are represented more than once (1.22 calls/HH; n = 783 unique households). Proportions and hypothesis tests

should be interpreted with caution until more appropriate analyses can be run that take this clustering into account.

3.1 Proportions by condition (for each disposition class)

Figure 1 shows that permission was most likely to be given when the new script and no tailoring condition was used (ordinal interaction). There seems to be a clear predominance of not using tailoring when the new script was used, but that tailoring does not make a difference when the old script was used.

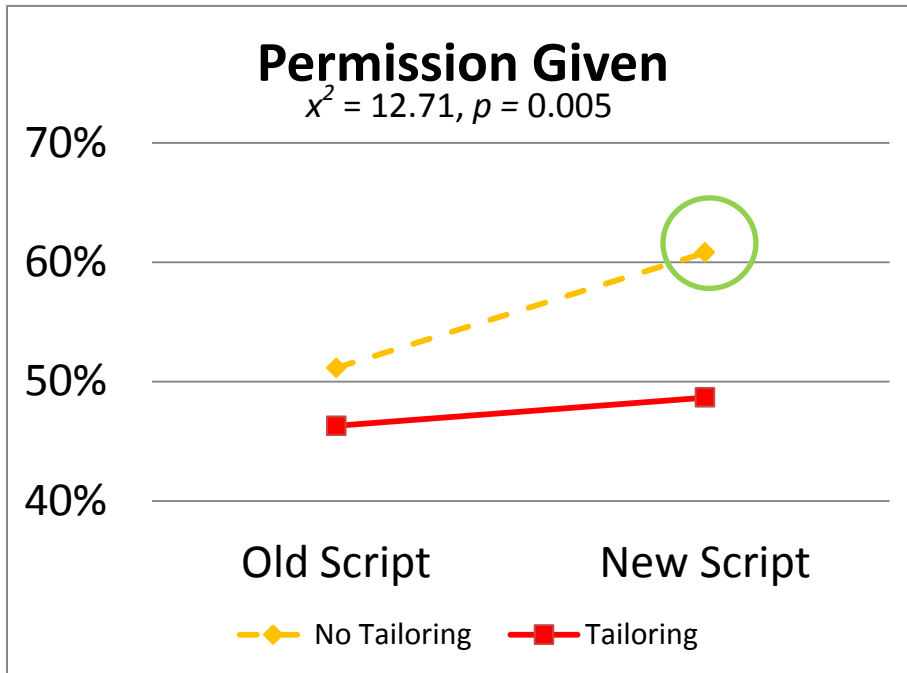


Figure 1. Effect of script and tailoring on permission given

Appointments (Figure 2) are difficult to interpret for the reasons discussed above. We do not know if they are latent refusals or respondents who are trying to be helpful. Either way, they result in a non-final disposition that impacts the follow-up workload. Appointments were least likely with new script and the effect of script seems to be a main effect with no (or a very small interaction) with tailoring. However, appointments could go down because parents are giving permission more often or because they are refusing or denying permission more often under the new script. Because the response options are multinomial in this analysis (i.e., the alternate call resolution to permission given is not just permission denied, but also appointment, or refusal), we need to review all dispositions to see the full picture.

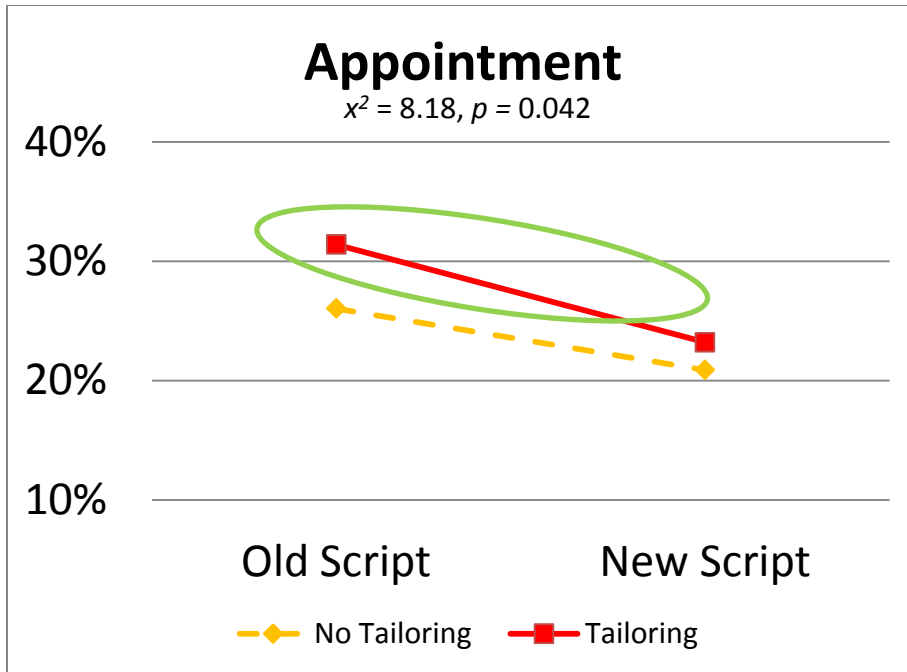


Figure 2. Effect of script and tailoring on appointment

Permission denied (Figure 3) is most likely with the new script and tailoring (possible ordinal interaction). It is interesting to see that the new script increases both permission given and permission denied as a fraction of total calls. This is one of the weaknesses of a call-level analysis. Also, note that permission given increases the most when the new script is combined with no tailoring. Permission denied, on the other hand, goes up when combined with tailoring. Thus it is becoming clear that the script seems to have a positive effect while tailoring may have a negative impact on dispositions.

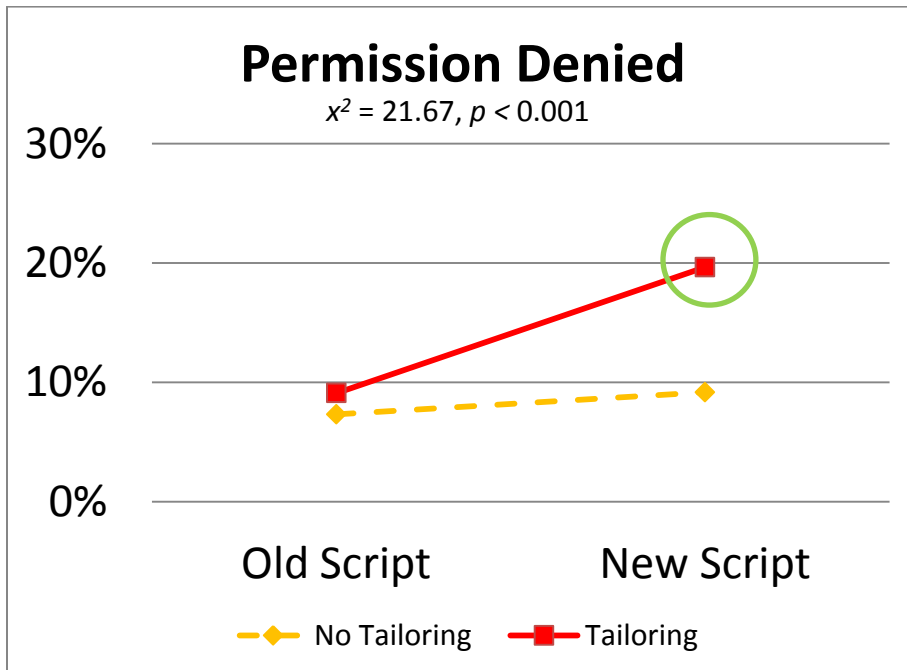


Figure 3. Effect of script and tailoring on permission denied

A higher proportion of refusals is associated with the new script (main effect), but notice that the p -value is above 0.05, meaning that these results are marginal at best and may not hold up when other adjustments are made to the data (Figure 4).

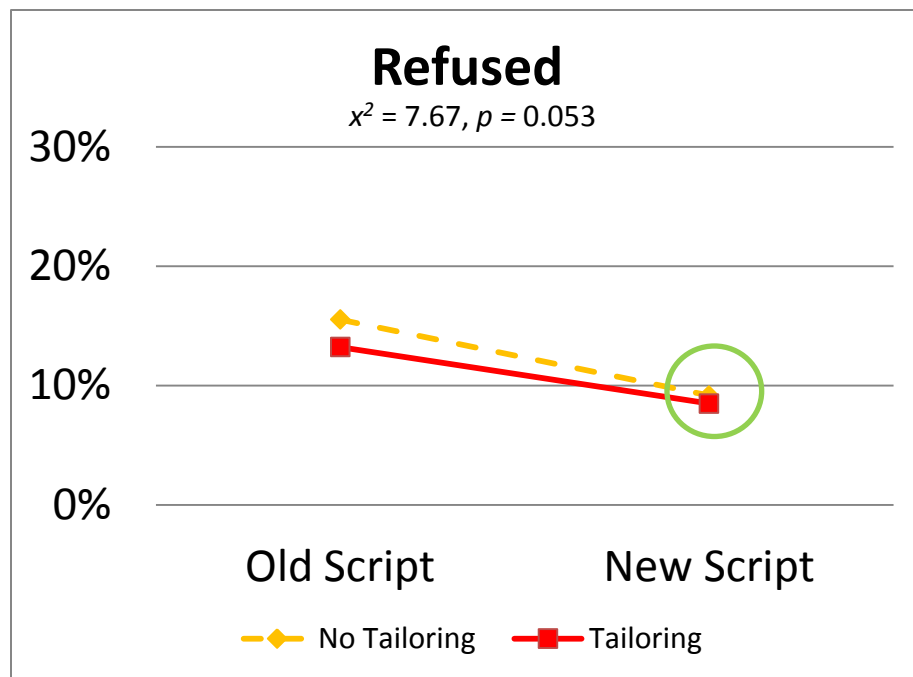


Figure 4. Effect of script and tailoring on permission refusal

4.0 Conclusions and Further Research

We have shown initial evidence that a modified permission script has an overall positive effect on *call* dispositions when parents' are asked permission to interview their teens. The effects of the modified tailoring protocol are less clear and will have to be explored further. The analysis as a whole is very cursory, and needs to be extended before drawing strong conclusions about the effects of the new script and tailoring. However, initial results, including additional analyses not presented here, gave us enough confidence to move forward with using the new script in production CHIS.

Future analyses will address the obvious limitations of the current analysis. First, we will take the clustering of the data into account. To address clustering of calls within household we have at least two options. We could include a random intercept or slope in a model predicting permission, or we could condition the data so that each household appears only once (e.g., first call or final call). To test for interviewer effects we will fit models with random intercepts (and possibly random slopes) for interviewers. Whether or not we explore interviewer-specific hypotheses, we want to be sure that our standard errors and p -values are not inflated by the underrepresented clustering in the data, leading us conclude that the new permission-gaining methods were effective when they were not. The abilities to avoid permission refusals and to gain permission likely vary across interviewers. Finally, respondents had to proceed through the entire verbatim script to be fully exposed to both the script and tailoring conditions. Respondents who refuse before hearing any of the script have no exposure to the script manipulation. Exposure to the tailoring manipulation depends on the interviewer's propensity to use tailoring when it is necessary. There is likely to be interviewer variability in the application of tailoring. The best way to measure this would be to code interviewer behavior from the quality assurance

recordings that were made during data collection. Alternative, we could analyze data from cases that have heard at least part of the script. Analyzing only permission given and permission denied cases may be one option because those dispositions can only be applied after the parent has heard the permission script. Such analyses will likely lead to clearer conclusions about the experiment.

References

- Dahlhamer, J., Simile, C., & Taylor, B. (2006). Exploring the Impact of Participant Reluctance on Data Quality in the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). In *Proceedings of Statistics Canada Symposium 2006 Methodological Issues in Measuring Population Health*.
- Groves, R. M., Singer, E., & Corning, A. (2000). Leverage-Saliency Theory of Survey Participation: Description and an Illustration. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 64(3), 299–308.