Cognitive Interviews for Questionnaire Development in the NSHAP Wave 3 Elder Mistreatment Module

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Abstract
The National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP) is a longitudinal study of community-dwelling older adults, carried out by NORC at the University of Chicago and funded by the National Institute on Aging. To date, NSHAP includes three waves of data, collected in person at five year intervals during 2005-06, 2010-11, and 2015-16. NSHAP's general focus is on the well-being and social worlds of older adults in the United States. In addition to collecting detailed data on social relationships, physical environment, and health, NSHAP measures elder mistreatment and neglect among community dwelling older adults in the United States. This methods paper focuses on the evolution of the NSHAP mistreatment and neglect modules, providing a detailed overview of measurement changes between Wave 1 and Wave 3 as well as scientific and practical rationale for replacing the four main Wave 1 elder abuse questions with the enhanced Wave 3 elder abuse and potential neglect modules. Our discussion includes an overview of how (and why) cognitive interviews were employed with a purposeful sample of new respondents to pre-test proposed elder mistreatment and neglect questions for Wave 3. We provide an overview of final decisions made, rationale behind them, and their effect on the revised instrument. Additionally, we discuss lessons learned from the cognitive interviews for interpretation of study outcomes in the analytic phase.

Key Words: Cognitive Interviewing, Surveys, Aging

1. Introduction

The National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP) is a longitudinal study of community-dwelling older adults, carried out by NORC at the University of Chicago and funded by the National Institute on Aging (NIA). To date, NSHAP includes three waves of data. This study relates to development work for 2015-16 (Wave 3).

Supplemental funding from NIA was provided to facilitate enhancement of the elder mistreatment module in Wave 3. Wave 1 included four stem questions about elder mistreatment, plus a follow-up network roster to identify the relationship of the perpetrator to the respondent. Findings based on analyses of these variables have been published in peer reviewed journals by scholars, such as Laumann and colleagues (2008), Luo and Waite (2013), and Wong and Waite (2017).

As a preliminary step in developing an enhanced elder mistreatment module for Wave 3, which would include an expanded set of elder mistreatment questions and new measures of neglect, cognitive interviews were employed to evaluate how respondents interpret the questions included in Wave 1. Cognitive interviews were conducted with a sample of

respondents recruited to reflect the NSHAP population to pre-test proposed elder mistreatment and neglect questions.

2. Methods

2.1 Sample
Eighteen respondents were recruited to reflect the NSHAP target population. Respondent age was selected in equal numbers in two groups, those between 57 and 73 years of age and those between 74 and 92. Approximately equal numbers of respondents were in each of two educational attainment groups; the first group had a high school education and some college and the second had a Bachelor's degree or higher. Respondent distribution across race/ethnicity subgroups closely resembled that of NSHAP.

2.2 Materials
The cognitive interview guide for this study was divided into five subsections. Two sections focused on questions inquiring into quality of care received by those with functional health limitations. The first dealt with inappropriate or insufficient assistance with daily medications. The second involved inappropriate or exploitative behaviors related to money management. The third section tested seven questions related to forms of mistreatment, including measures of verbal mistreatment, emotional mistreatment, financial mistreatment and physical mistreatment. The fourth section examined follow up questions regarding the specifics of the mistreatment or behavior.

2.3 Procedure
The cognitive interview protocol for this study was developed using an approach based on the work of Jobe and Mingay (1989) and further refined by Dugoni, Sanderson, and Jergovic (2002). The authors also acknowledge the influence of the landmark work of Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski (2000). Researchers new to these techniques or interested in learning more about cognitive interviewing will also find the work of Willis (2005) of great use in exploring many of the techniques mentioned here. The interviews in the present study centered on a number of issues. The first of these involved the wording and clarity of the items developed on the modules described above. Probes in this section of the interview asked about the perceived meaning of a number of phrases and also explored alternative wordings. Paraphrase probes also were used to identify ways of clarifying problematic questions.

Split ballot probes allowed testing of alternative forms of questions asking about concepts identified as potential sources of abuse. The split-ballot approach was used in two ways. First, respondents were assigned to one or the other form of the question being tested. Second, after respondents answered their assigned form, they were asked to react to the alternate form of the question, followed by probing to learn if and how the different wording would have influenced their answer. Thus, half of the respondents answered each form of the question first and all respondents gave an opinion of both versions.

An additional aspect of these cognitive interviews involved examining the set of elder mistreatment questions included in the first wave of NSHAP. In order to preserve the ability to make trend comparisons across waves of data, these questions would need to be repeated in Wave 3. For this set, the probes allowed us to examine whether any issues seemed to be present, and to inform the decision of whether to repeat the items as fielded

in Wave 1 or to modify the elder mistreatment module for Wave 3. As described below, this examination provided some useful information for data reporting.

3. Results

The following Issues related to Wording and clarity were identified. First, certain phrases and wording were not age appropriate. An example of this was the phrase, "put you down." Older respondents were not familiar with the use of this phrase in the contexts presented in the questionnaire. Probes explored alternative wordings, for example, everyone seemed to understand "insulted" and reported that this wording was clearer. In general, questions involving colloquialisms, particularly ones that were not in common usage for the focal age range were not easily understood. It is best to avoid unnecessary use of colloquialism that may be misunderstood by target population.

Another issue identified in the interviews was that respondents' elaborations and examples in probes revealed that many respondents were thinking about irrelevant things. For example, many respondents were unclear on the relevance of incidents and reported things related to general public encounters or minor one-time incidents which were not examples of elder mistreatment. The recommendation was made that the survey provide explicit information on severity, frequency, and duration of the incidents intended to be covered by the questions.

It was also clear that Lengthy phrasing was confusing to many respondents. For example: "Is there anyone who has done any of the following: hit you, kicked you, slapped you, pushed you, or thrown things at you?" was such a long list of examples that respondents had trouble recalling it and responding to it. Paraphrase probes showed primacy or recency effects; respondents tended to remember either the things mentioned at the beginning of the list of examples or the things mentioned at the end. No one reproduced everything when restating the question. Some similar questions resulted in totally scrambled responses or in respondents using the list as though it were intended as exhaustive.

Split ballot probes that were used to examine alternative wordings included for example the phrase "misled you to get you to give them…" and was compared to the alternative "misled you to give them…" The comparison indicated that the simpler version was preferred by most. In these probes, simpler wording with fewer dependent clauses or linking words were perceived as simpler. It was noted that an example was sometimes helpful, but multiple examples tended to be perceived as an exhaustive list and led to confusion about whether items not explicitly mentioned were relevant.

With regard to the items we explored from established items that were not candidates for revision in order to preserve trends, there were some observed problems particularly with regard to items dealing with Independent Activities of Daily Living (IADL). In some cases, the respondents indicated that no help was needed but probes indicated that help was sometimes offered and/or taken. Further probing indicated more specific information regarding frequency and type of help or clarification that getting help did not necessarily mean someone in a caregiver role would have helped respondents understand the questions better.

For the most part, findings of cognitive interviews of this type are used to revise questions for full pretest or main study. Reports should note where changes were made. However, because inn this case, the decision was made to keep established wording to maintain comparability, it is important to note that information from the cognitive interviews can be useful in other ways.

In instances where it is not desired to modify existing questions results can still be useful to provide possible explanations for equivocal results. In our case, the data from the cognitive interviews also provides a useful set of caveats for inclusion in analytic reports using the dataset from the main survey.
In longitudinal research, one can also create a bank of cognitive interview observations to help in keeping track of these caveats and potential clarifications. This is particularly important because main study does not have the luxury of probing answers.

4. Conclusions

Lessons learned from this round of cognitive interviews on NSHAP Elder Mistreatment modules include the following. Elaborative probes often helped to identify problems and develop rewording to avoid colloquialism and vague generalities. Paraphrase probes allowed us to identify primacy and recency biases and avoid overly lengthy questions. Follow-up probes also identified situations where respondents were unclear about severity and frequency of targeted events.

Even in situations where changes could not be made because of the desire to preserve established wording, cognitive interviews identified information useful for caveats and documenting limitations in reporting. Banking items for use in subsequent rounds and surveys can also be a useful tool in continuing research.

Acknowledgments

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