Creating Number Categories in a Question

How Can I Structure a Question About Age?

Age is an important factor in interpreting results of an evaluation because age influences how people learn, perceive and change behavior (Schuman and Presser, 1981). Age is also important in determining whether you have recruited the appropriate target audience in your program. Yet, age is also a very, very sensitive issue for many people. Research has demonstrated that many people will avoid telling the precise truth about their age.

RECOMMENDATION 1
> If you don't have to ask information about age, don't. If you think that age would be interesting to know, that is not a good enough reason to ask about it.
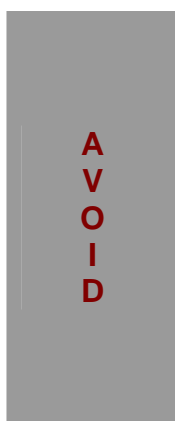
RECOMMENDATION 2
> Place this question at the very end of your telephone interview or survey unless you need to screen for a certain age group. Respondents who have bought into your study and find that it reflects good aims are more likely to answer such a question; the beginning of the survey comprises a way to convince the respondent of the worth of your study.

RECOMMENDATION 3
> Consider using categories of age groups but make sure the age categories you create are relevant to your program issue.

RECOMMENDATION 4
> Make certain the age categories are mutually exclusive. Note the following incorrect categories in the question below: can you spot the errors?

A V O I D

And, what is your age? (circle number)

1. under 20 years
2. 20-35 years
3. 35-55 years
4. 55-70 years
5. 70-85 years
6. 70-85 years
7. 85 AND OVER

ANSWER
In answers 3 through 6 there is an error: each repeats a number in a category previous to it. Such a distribution would lead some people who are 35 years old for instance, to circle 2 and others with the same age, to circle 3, giving you invalid data to use in comparing ages.

In answer 2, there is no error with the number 20 because the answer number one, "under 20 years" means just that, younger than 20.

One way to correct the above errors is to use the following mutually exclusive categories:

U
S
E

And, what is your age? (circle number)

8.   under 20 years

9.   20-34 years

10. 35-54 years

11. 55-69 years

12. 70-84 years

13. 85 AND OVER

The recommendation for creating number categories not only applies to age but to any questions where you need to create number categories.

Other examples include mastitis counts, farm income, and frequency of spraying pesticides, eating certain foods, or practicing leadership techniques.

Nancy Ellen Kiernan, Ph.D., Program Evaluator, nekiernan@psu.edu

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