Reviewer’s report

Title: Applying an extended theoretical framework for data collection mode to health services research

Version: 1 Date: 18 March 2010

Reviewer: Catherine Chittleborough

Reviewer’s report:

This is an interesting paper that applies and extends an existing theoretical framework to assess how survey mode influences response quality. I particularly like the term ‘mode feature’ to encompass increasingly complex survey data collection methods.

Major Compulsory Revisions

2. While the focus of the paper is on how survey mode influences response quality, for it to be useful for researchers in deciding between survey modes, the discussion needs more acknowledgement that a survey mode that results in reduced socially desirable responses, for example, may not be as effective in obtaining high overall response rates. So while you may have respondents that answer truthfully, these respondents may not be representative of your population of interest. Both response rate and response quality need to be considered in making decisions about data collection modes.

3. The introduction states that much of the empirical evidence for mode effects has been generated by research outside the health sector. However, I think these issues are well recognised within health research and many empirical studies of differences in various outcomes, from hospital patient satisfaction, to quality of life among various patient groups, to socioeconomic variables within health surveys, exist and thus already highlight that mode is important for health research. This is not the first paper to explore mode issues in health research, and other papers could be acknowledged.

4. The cognitive burden on respondents is one mediator that influences response quality, but what about other burdens? For example, the time it takes to complete the survey, and how completing the survey can fit into other demands on the respondent’s time. Such factors may influence response quality as much as response rates.

5. Are the elements in the social exchange theory, e.g. perception of rewards and costs, and trust in the researcher, influenced by the current climate of increasing market saturation – potential respondents being bombarded with surveys and sales pitches? Again, such issues may have an effect on response quality as well as response rates.

6. In the discussion about variables that mediate the impact of mode feature (p9),
it is stated that the level of cognitive burden for individuals is less subjective than perceptions of either impersonality or legitimacy, but I am not convinced about this. Is there further evidence to support this statement?

Discretionary Revisions

7. The Respondent is described (p10) as the person who is “being assessed”. This sounds as though the respondent is under scrutiny. Perhaps a more appropriate term would be that a respondent is a provider of information? Unless this terminology comes from another source, in which case this should be clarified.

8. What is the difference between level of response and validity of response (p18-19)? If the level of an attribute is reported accurately, then the attribute will be valid. Similarly, the accuracy, or validity of a response determines the level of the attribute. While Figure 1 simply lists level and reliability, the text highlights level, reliability and accuracy separately. The text could be re-worded to link the level and accuracy concepts together.

9. The concept that year of publication should be considered when comparing survey modes should be introduced before the final summary of the paper.

Minor Essential Revisions

10. The acronym ACASI should be defined when it is first used (p11).

11. The sentence “Quality of life is increasingly assessed… etc” (p19, second sentence under Objective/subjective constructs) does not need the comma after “life”.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests