

Privacy in Survey Interview Settings: Results from a Randomized Experiment

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INTRODUCTION

Survey data collection in developing countries, especially in rural and remote areas, offers unique challenges and opportunities. While encouraging respondent participation is quite a challenge in urban areas, survey interviewers in remote, rural areas often encounter situations where individuals are eager and enthusiastic about participation. Unfortunately, other family members and neighbors are also curious and enthusiastic and this can often compromise the privacy of the interview setting.

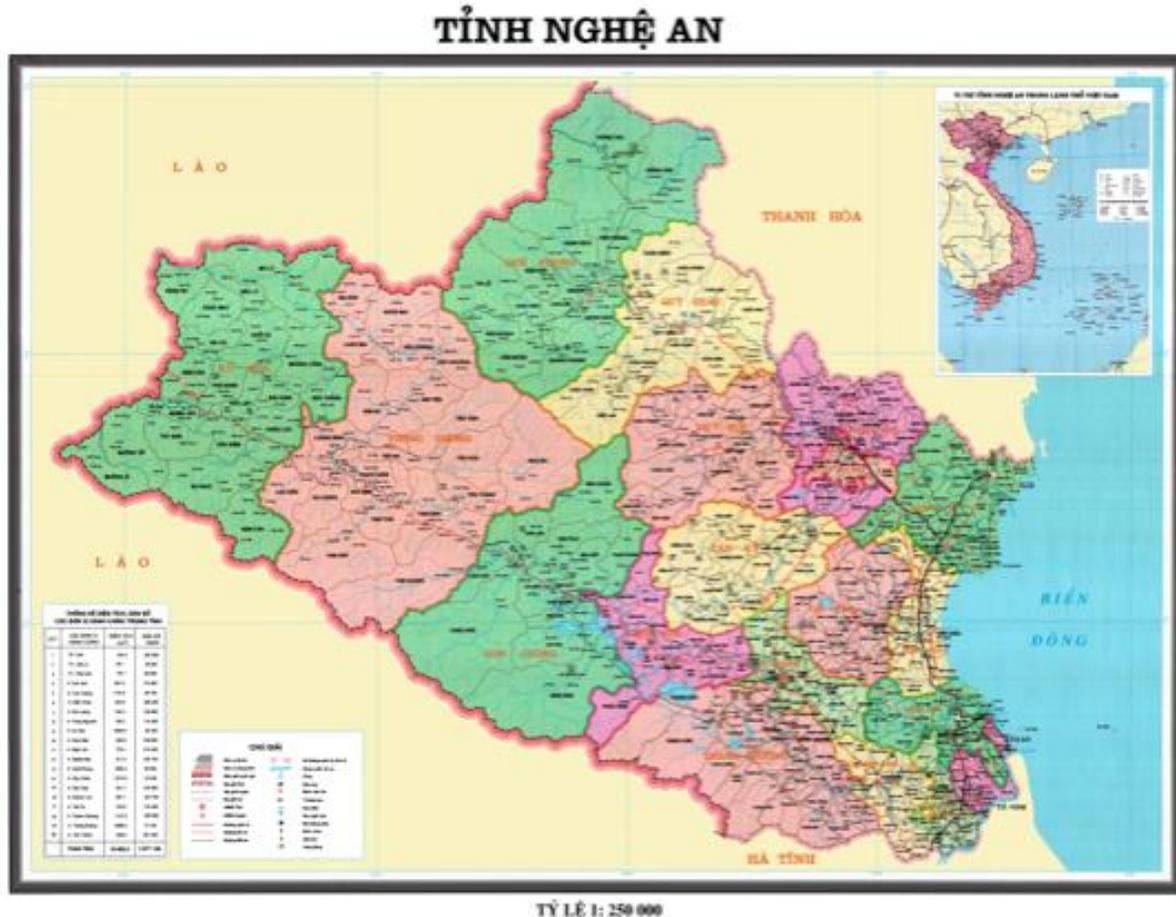
Privacy in an interview setting is a basic tenant of survey interviewing, and is key to obtaining forthcoming responses. Without privacy, respondents are likely to feel increased pressure to provide socially acceptable and desirable answers. Yet maintaining privacy in remote, rural settings in developing countries is a challenge. First, house construction is often open and closed off spaces are scarce. Second, the novelty of having outsiders and curiosity about the survey often mean an interviewer is faced with onlookers who, at best, can hear the interview and the responses given, and at worst, offer the respondent opinions on how they should answer. Even in the best of situations where a room is available, individuals walking in on the interview or passing through is an unfortunately reality. While challenges to privacy in an interview setting are readily acknowledged by researchers collecting data in rural, developing country contexts, little is known about the implications that lack of privacy have on respondent answers. At the same time, attempts to increase privacy also have costs that are little understood. This research uses an experimental design to better understand the implications of having a private interview setting on respondent answers and survey operations.

The monotony of daily life, the lack of outside visitors, curiosity, and excitement about the presence of interviewers often means individuals are anxious to participate. Interviewers conducting research in rural, developing country areas rarely are challenged by refusal to participate. However, the eagerness of respondents to participate is often accompanied by onlookers that are curious about what participation involves. The interviewer is often faced with other family members, friends, and neighbors hanging around in the vicinity of the interview. Achieving privacy for the interview setting is challenging. Interviewers frequently complain that they feel uncomfortable asking people to leave when they, the interviewer, is a guest in the respondents home. While the lack of privacy in interview settings is often acknowledged as a challenge, little is known about its impact on respondent answers and survey operations.

RESEARCH AND DATA

To better understand the implications of interview settings and how privacy may impact respondent answers we built an experiment into a face-to-face survey conducted in a remote, rural area of north central Vietnam. The Rural Village Life Survey (RVLS) was conducted in two remote, rural villages in the Nghe An province (see Figure 1). The two villages were selected from district and commune records to be socio-economically similar. In VillageA (n=289) interviewers conducted the in-person interviews by going from house

to house to locate respondents and then conducting the interview in or near the respondent's house. Interviewers were instructed to maintain privacy as best they could. Field supervisor observations were that privacy levels were mixed, and supervisors often saw/caught others listening in on the interview. In VillageB (n=265) we administered the same instrument but respondents were invited to come to a designated



location away from their home for the interview. This designated location was a cordoned off area where field staff had more control over privacy and where non-respondents could be kept out.

This paper uses the RVLS and its built-in experiment to examine the impact of privacy levels on respondent answers. Specifically we examine whether the mean responses for answers, controlling for socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, differ significantly between VillageA (low privacy) and VillageB (high privacy).

Additionally, we examine the types of questions that maybe more sensitive to the privacy level of the interview setting. We hypothesize that fact-based questions will be less sensitive to privacy than attitudinal questions. Additionally, we hypothesize that the more sensitive the attitudinal question the more impacted responses will be by privacy. Finally, we examine how the interview settings privacy impacts on knowledge-based measures.

FACT-BASED: An example of a fact based question is, "Was your household classified as a poor household from the poverty alleviation program based on the government poor

standard?”. We also have village and commune records specifying the percent of households in each village that were classified as poor.

ATTITUDINAL: We use a variety of attitudinal questions from the fairly innocuous to ones that are more sensitive. Of the more sensitive, we ask a series of questions about neighbors: “Now I want to ask you some questions about your neighbors. Think about a scale that ranges from 1 to 8. 1 means that you think the statement is very true and 8 means that you think the statement is very false. The numbers in between represent whether you feel closer to the statement being true or closer to the statement being false. For example, choosing 2 means that you don’t think the statement is completely true but very close to being completely true. While choosing 3 means that you think it is a little less true than choosing 2. So using this scale from 1 to 8 tell me how much you think the following statements are true or not true to your own opinion or feeling:

- All my neighbors are people that can be trusted;
- I feel like I work much harder than some of my neighbors;
- I have some complaints about how my neighbors behave;
- I feel very comfortable telling a secret to my neighbor and trust my neighbor not to tell anyone else.

We also use data from interviewers, field supervisors, and project managers to better understand the costs and benefits of efforts to increase interview setting privacy.

CONCLUSION

Whether in Malawi, Nepal, or Vietnam survey researchers working in rural areas of developing countries are often challenged with maintaining a private setting for the interview. Family members, friends, and neighbors are often in the vicinity and their presence is likely to impact respondent answers. Understanding whether and how the privacy of interview settings impacts respondent answers is crucial for conducting research in many developing country settings.