AN EXPERIMENT WITH AN ADVANCE LETTER ON AN INTERVIEW INQUIRY¹

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In an earlier study (Cartwright and Tucker, 1967) we explored the possibility of reducing the number of calls on an interview inquiry by writing to people beforehand asking when they were most likely to be in. That experiment was unsuccessful: more people replied saying that they did not want to be interviewed than wrote telling us suitable times to call, and the final response rate in the experimental group who were sent letters was lower than in the control group who were not.

Advance letters which simply inform people about the study and do not ask for any reply may have a different effect. To test this we decided to try to assess the effect of an advance letter on the response rate in our next study.

METHOD

The study was carried out in 12 randomly selected registration districts in England and Wales. The areas were chosen after stratification by region and with a probability proportional to population. In each of the areas the General Register Office selected a random sample of 180 legitimate births. For a random sixth of these, 30 in each area, we wanted to interview the fathers, and for the other five sixths the mothers. Alternate mothers and fathers selected were sent the following note:

The Medical Care Research Unit of the Institute of Community Studies is doing a study of families with young children in this area and may be asking for your help. If one of our team calls on you we hope you will agree to be interviewed.

All the information given to us will be treated with the strictest confidence and will not be passed to

anyone outside the Institute. We plan to write a book about the study but it will not be possible to identify the people taking part; no names will be mentioned in it.

To do this study we have picked from the register of births a cross-section of people who have recently had a baby. We can only get a true picture if we are able to see all the people whose names have been chosen.

You may like to know that the Institute of Community Studies is a non-profit research organization which has published a number of books about family life and about medical services. Several doctors and other experts have helped in planning this study and deciding what questions to ask.

Thank you, in advance, for your help.

Ann Cartwright

The fathers were subsequently approached by men interviewers and the mothers by women. The interview was mainly about family planning.

RESULTS

THE RESPONSE OF MOTHERS AND FATHERS

The response among those still living in the area was 91% for the mothers and significantly less, 82%, for the fathers. There was no difference in the response of mothers who were sent a letter and those who were not but the letter apparently halved the failure rate among the fathers, reducing it from 23% to 12%. These differences are shown in Table I.

In our earlier study (Cartwright and Tucker, 1967), too, the letter seemed to have more impact on men than on women, but that time, when they were asked to reply and say when they were most likely to be in and able to be interviewed, it had an adverse effect. Some possible hypotheses to explain these differences are:

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TABLE I
RESPONSE AND REASONS FOR FAILURE

Outcome	Mothers		Fathers	
	Letter	No letter	Letter	No letter
Interviewed	746	749	140	117
Refused	63	53	17	31
Temporarily away, not contacted or language difficulties	8	15	3	4
Respondent died or ineligible	1	1	—	—
Moved	82	82	20	28
Total	900	900	180	180
Proportion of successful interviews among those still living in area (%)	91	92	88	77

(1) Men take more notice of written approaches than women. This might be because:

- Men, as part of their male role, read the letters that come to the household, whoever they are addressed to, whereas women do not.
- Women respond to the direct personal approach more readily than men, whether or not they have had a letter beforehand.

(2) Women generally, and mothers of young babies in particular, spend more time in their homes than men. They are often glad to talk to an interviewer. Men more often have to be persuaded, because their time at home is more limited and more precious to them.

(3) The response rate among mothers who were not sent a letter was so high, either because of their willingness to be interviewed or because of their interest in the survey, that an advance letter could not improve it. Fathers were less likely to respond, so the possible scope for improvement was greater and the preparatory letter reduced the number of failures.

The theory that women respond to a personal approach more readily than men is supported by data from two surveys of general practitioners. In a postal inquiry about family planning, there was no difference in the response by men and women doctors (Cartwright, 1968). But in the present study we attempted to interview the general practitioners of the mothers and fathers in our sample and the success rate was 74% among the 644 men doctors and 87% among the 55 women. The contents of the interview were similar to those of the postal questionnaire.

SOCIAL CLASS VARIATIONS IN RESPONSE

The father's occupation was on the birth certificates for all the sample. It was classified by social

class, using the Registrar General's Classification of Occupations (1966). Table II shows the variation in response by social class for mothers. It is lower, 83% among the professionals, than for the other social classes. Among the professionals it was 89% when a letter was sent, and 76% without one. Such a difference is likely to occur by chance in more than 5% but less than 10% of samples of this size.

TABLE II
SOCIAL CLASS AND RESPONSE OF MOTHERS

Social Class of Father's Occupation*	Proportion of Successful Interviews**		
	Letter %	No Letter %	All Mothers %
I Professional	89 (47)	76 (45)	83 (92)
II Intermediate	88 (102)	92 (112)	90 (214)
III Skilled non-manual	92 (84)	96 (93)	94 (177)
III Skilled manual	93 (341)	92 (347)	93 (688)
IV Partly skilled	91 (138)	91 (141)	91 (279)
V Unskilled	88 (65)	93 (57)	90 (122)
Unknown, Armed Forces, etc.	93 (40)	95 (22)	94 (62)

*The classification is based on the Registrar General's Classification of Occupations (1966).

**People who died or moved have been excluded. The figures in parentheses are the numbers on which the percentages are based (= 100%).

The response among the fathers did not vary significantly between the social classes.

INTERVIEWERS' VIEWS ON THE LETTER

The 74 interviewers who worked on this study all completed a single-page postal questionnaire when they had finished their work, giving their views about the preparatory letter. On balance all but two of the 23 men interviewers preferred a preparatory letter but a quarter of the 51 women interviewers would rather not have had one. Three-fifths of the men thought the preparatory letter had improved the response; half this proportion, three-tenths, of the women thought this. Seven women but none of the men thought the preparatory letter made people less likely to be interviewed.

SUGGESTIONS

Interviewers made a number of suggestions about the form and content of the letter and the way it was sent out. Several felt it would have been better to make the letter more personal by writing or typing in the name of the person, and one suggested that the interviewer might have been named in the letter.

Perhaps mothers and fathers would have reacted in different ways to a letter giving more detail about the subject of the study. The Survey Research Centre at the University of Michigan is at present experimenting with a new form of letter which is very short, says nothing about the subject of the study,

and merely announces that an interviewer will arrive at the door. The hypothesis underlying this is that people will be curious about the interview and will have no basis to reject it out-of-hand. Simple curiosity may increase the response (Cannell, 1968). Another investigator (Ferber, 1964) reported a higher response rate, 90%, with a long detailed letter than with a short letter of introduction, 76%. It is relatively easy to organize research into the impact of letters of different lengths or making different points. It is less easy to study their effect on different sorts of people because, inevitably, little is known about the people who do not co-operate. This study was unusual in having information about the social class of nearly all the people in the sample.

CONCLUSION

On this survey the letter did not improve the general response rate among the mothers but it almost certainly did increase it for the fathers. Our results suggest that a letter may be helpful when the response rate might otherwise be relatively poor. It may have improved the response among the mothers in the professional class but the results on this were inconclusive.

Most interviewers preferred a preparatory letter. It may have given them confidence when making their initial approach and they felt it was more professional. Thus, whatever the effects on response, there are advantages in sending a letter. Another benefit is that it helps to remove the possibility of any misunderstandings about the organization making the study, how the person was chosen, and the way in which information is to be used.

One question that has been left out of this inquiry is the preference of informants themselves. This is an omission we hope to make good in later studies.

It is not of course possible to tell whether an advance letter would have the same effect, or lack of effect, on surveys about other topics or with different samples.

SUMMARY

Advance letters were sent to a random half of a sample of mothers and fathers of young babies. The parents were subsequently interviewed about family planning.

The response rate among the mothers was 91% and this was not affected by the letter. The response rate among the fathers was less good, 82%, and for them the letter apparently halved the failure rate reducing it from 23% to 12%.

Interviewers on balance liked the advance letter even though most of the women interviewers, who interviewed mothers, recognized that it did not improve the response.

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