Preferences for Interviewer Dialect Use and Race Among African American Health Survey Respondents

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This presentation will share findings from a qualitative study exploring African American health survey respondents' attitudes about African American interviewers' use of two dialects, American Standard English (ASE) and African American English (AAE). ASE is the most used English dialect in the U.S., but many African Americans use AAE and may prefer its use as an expression of in-group identity and pride. Researchers have noted potential for miscommunications between ASE and AAE speakers that may influence the survey interview. This study investigated how differences in language use may influence health survey respondents' participation in health surveys, cognitions when answering survey questions, estimation of socially desirable responses, communication of answers, and comfort and trust in interviewers and the treatment of survey data. Respondents were also queried about their preferences for African American interviewers. In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with 29 adults representing a range of dialect use from Detroit, MI, and Toledo, OH, between May-August 2009. Pre-recorded samples of interviewer speech demonstrating varying levels of ASE and AAE were used to stimulate discussion about language use during different types of interviewing tasks: recruitment, informed consent, and administering sensitive and non-sensitive survey items. The interviews were digitally recorded to permit linguistic coding of respondents' dialect use and to facilitate analyses using qualitative data analysis software. Early analyses indicate complex interactions between respondents' own dialect use and their attitudes about and preferences for dialect use by African American interviewers during a health survey. In addition, several processes have been identified, such as high language self-monitoring and a tendency for some respondents to translate an interviewer's utterances into AAE in their heads and translate their responses back to ASE before vocalizing them. Major themes and findings from this research will be presented, with possible implications for the dialectical skill sets of health survey interviewers.