



# Telephone Interviewing

*a t t h e I n s t i t u t e*

CATI is a telephone interviewing system for survey research. Interviewers, sitting at computer terminals wearing telephone headsets, read to respondents questions as they appear on the screen, and enter the responses into the computer via the keyboard. The Institute's CATI facility comprises a network of seven interviewer workstations and one supervisor workstation.

After evaluating a number of international products, the Institute selected Microtab as its CATI system software. This Melbourne-based product is widely used in Australia and overseas, notably at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan and the National Opinion Research Centre at the University of Chicago.

The CATI system performs all the basic data collection tasks of a survey. Starting with a list of telephone numbers (either of known respondents or a random selection of publicly available numbers), the CATI system selects the appropriate number to be called at a certain time based on priority, sequence and timing of calls. The system sends the telephone number to an available interviewer, and then records the outcome of the call (No Answer, Engaged, Completed Interview).

- During an interview, the CATI system decides which questions should be omitted for a particular respondent. If, for example, a respondent answered 'no' to the question 'do you use child care?', the system would skip all questions relating to use of child care.
- Inconsistent data can be detected as soon as they are entered – for example, if a respondent answered 'yes' to child care when a previous response indicated there are no children present.
- Responses outside a pre-determined range will not be allowed – for example, answering 'ten' to the number of days a week child care is used.
- The system will automatically personalise survey wording, replacing a question

*In its 14 years of operation, the Australian Institute of Family Studies has employed a wide variety of methods for surveying Australians on issues affecting families, including mailout and optical mark reading. A number of studies have involved interviewers visiting respondents in their homes and completing pencil and paper surveys.*

**EVA MILLS**  
*reports that in 1991 the Institute established a Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) Unit – a cost-effective means of carrying out quality survey research, with many advantages over traditional methods.*

such as, 'Does your son/daughter, Name, ever travel to school by *himself/herself*?' with, for example, 'Does your daughter, Maria, ever travel to school by herself?'

#### **CATI at the Institute**

The scope of many of the Institute's studies make door-knocking and personal interviewing an extremely time-consuming and costly prospect. CATI is an ideal method of survey research for large, complex, quantitative surveys requiring particular samples to be identified. It enables us to contact efficiently a large number of households with the aim of specifically identifying a small group within the community.

Since its establishment in late 1991, the Institute's CATI Unit has conducted a number of telephone surveys, with excellent results.

The Dependent Care study, a joint project with the Work and Family Unit of the Department of Industrial Relations, was the first major CATI study conducted at the Institute. Approximately 20,000 randomly selected numbers were telephoned Australia-wide over eight weeks by a team of 20 interviewers and three supervisors working in the evenings and on weekends. After completing a brief screening interview, 2,642 employees who lived with a partner and/or children were interviewed about work and family issues.

Currently, the second stage of a longitudinal study, the Carers' Program Telephone Survey, is being conducted for Melbourne University's Department of Psychiatry. Stage One of this study involved a team of 25 interviewers and four supervisors telephoning approximately 30,000 randomly selected telephone numbers over 12 weeks. After completing a brief screening interview, 976 carers Victoria-wide participated in an hour-long interview that asked about their caring situations and use of services and needs. With CATI, feedback to respondents in the form of a Carers' Newsletter was available a few months after the completion of fieldwork. Twelve months later, the same carers are currently being re-interviewed for the second wave of this study.

The Microtab CATI software can also be used for Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI), where interviewers take laptop computers instead of paper questionnaires into the homes of respondents. CAPI is yet to be trialled at the Institute, and we look forward to exploring its application in the near future.

#### **Advantages of CATI**

The CATI system allows the entire data collection process to be conducted in-house, which ensures improvements in data quality, speed and cost. Much of the burdensome decision-making involved in pencil and paper interviews is taken over by the system and this allows supervisors and interviewers to concentrate on interviewing technique. Interviewers achieve a consistently high

interviewing standard, since supervisors have more control over the interviewing process.

The system is economically efficient since it combines interviewing and data entry. It eliminates key punching and minimises the labour-intensive process of data checking and editing, thus reducing the lag between interviewing and data analysis. Since the CATI room is in the heart of the Institute's building, regular system reports during 'fieldwork' allow costs to be easily monitored!

#### **What about personal contact?**

Cost benefits are all very well, but in social research a good interviewer-responder relationship is essential.

We have found that using the telephone does not prevent a well-trained, empathic interviewer from developing a strong rapport with the respondent over the course of the interview. We have an excellent team of interviewers and supervisors who maintain a high standard of interviewing without losing sight of the *individual* on the other end of the line. As a result, respondents can be asked over the telephone anything that can be asked face to face. For some sensitive questions, the added degree of anonymity provided by the telephone can be an advantage. Indeed, many people find a telephone interview far less invasive than a home visit.

The Institute's major CATI surveys have been lengthy and complex interviews involving sensitive issues, yet feedback from respondents has been very positive. Many of those interviewed welcomed the opportunity to discuss issues that are important to them. Some respondents felt that they could 'tell you things that you can't tell other people'.

The ability to maintain personal contact, along with increased flexibility, guaranteed data quality, and excellent turnaround time, ensure that Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing is a powerful research tool with many advantages over traditional methods. The Institute looks forward to developing its CATI Unit to its full potential in 1995.

**Eva Mills** is Technical Services Officer with the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and responsible for CATI support.

For further information about how the Institute's CATI Unit might benefit your organisation please contact Eva Mills at the Institute on (03) 214 7888.



### OVERSEAS FAMILY RESEARCH

## News

**In this regular column, AIFS Information Development Coordinator DEBORAH WHITEHEAR keeps us up to date with world-wide developments in family research and other developments affecting families.**

### International Directory of IYF Research Activities

During 1994 the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the United Nations International Year of the Family Secretariat have been compiling a database and Directory to record research activities auspiced for the International Year of the Family (IYF). Questionnaires in English, Spanish and French were sent to IYF National Coordinating Committees in all countries for distribution to agencies and individuals involved in IYF research projects and activities. Institute expertise in database design, development and publishing has been complemented by the IYF Secretariat which has facilitated contacts at the national level and has made available its invaluable translation service.

Postponed by several weeks in order to accommodate the large number of late replies, the Directory is now scheduled to be released at the Inter-regional Meeting of IYF National Coordinators/Focal Points in Slovakia in early February.

The aim of the Directory is not only to record the many national and international IYF research activities, but also to facilitate the sharing of information to support family research and to develop a worldwide network of organisations concerned with family research and information dissemination. As part of the correspondence associated with the project a number of such centres have been identified. Brief descriptions of the Bratislava International Centre for Family Studies and the Netherlands Family Research Council are included here as examples of active centres of family research and information.

### Bratislava International Centre

The Bratislava International Centre for Family Studies was established in late 1993 by the Slovakian government as the Slovak Republic's main contribution to the International Year

of the Family. The Centre's programs focus on supporting and strengthening the efforts of Slovakia and other countries of Eastern Europe (including the Republics of the former Soviet Union) to formulate, implement and monitor policies that help strengthen democratic principles in families. The Centre provides technical assistance and training to developing countries and to states which are experiencing the breakdown of families due to recent social, political and economic changes in the region.

Future work of the Centre will assist the Slovakian government in the new Republic's transition period by, for example, providing advice on prevention models for delivery of social and educational services and programs, and developing a national system of social and economic policies. Other activities include: assimilating and organising demographic research information into an interdisciplinary database for family studies; consulting with and training professional educators, psychologists, social workers and counsellors; and providing a setting where the problems and issues of families can be studied from an interdisciplinary framework.

The Centre will soon invite visiting Scholars, Fellows and Interns to participate as lecturers, trainers and research scholars. From 1995 a series of expert group meetings focusing on the most pressing issues and problems of families is planned.

During this international family year, the Centre has organised special events at the national and international level which will culminate in a major Inter-regional Meeting of National Coordinators and Focal Points early in February 1995. The main objective of this meeting will be to assess the observance of the International Year of the Family and to formulate a plan of follow-up action to the Year.

A recent initiative of the Centre has been the establishment of a Fund of Support of Young Families. Started with a generous grant from the Slovak government of three million Slovak crowns (US \$100,000), further funding will be sought through gifts and contributions from entrepreneurs, foundations and institutions. The Fund will contribute to the funding of young family business enterprises, and to support projects for developing services (such as child care) for young families whose parents are in the workforce, projects of temporary social housing, and the monitoring of problems in young families.

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### Netherlands Family Council

The Netherlands Family Council is one of a number of independent foundations in the Netherlands receiving government funding to perform research and other activities in the social science field. It undertakes many separate projects with most involving cooperation with other organisations and independent experts.