Minimising Response Bias in Measuring Spiritual Impact

This paper represents a summary of discussions and learning from the KIF Spiritual Impact Learning Community, in partnership with the Accord Network. It is intended to encourage dialogue on the issue, and continued learning. It is part of a series of Discussion Papers that so far include the 'Ethics of Measuring Spiritual Impact' and 'Measuring Salvation: Should We or Shouldn't We?'

It is a well-researched fact that at times people respond to survey and interview questions with less-than-accurate information for a variety of reasons. Spiritual impact evaluation is no stranger to this "response bias" problem. This paper summarises, insights and thoughts about how best to tackle this issue in assessing spiritual impact and change. These should be considered in the context of the overall spiritual metrics ethical principles and guidelines.

Causes of Response Bias in Measuring Spiritual Impact

It is useful to think of the causes for spiritual metrics response bias in terms of the two engaged parties: the enumerators and the respondents. To a large degree, the details of these causes are intimately related, and in some cases are mirror images of each other.

1. **Enumerator-led bias:**
   a. Enumerators may attempt to "shepherd" positive responses. This is particularly the case when the enumerators are pastors.
   b. Enumerators may not agree with the definitions of spiritual growth in the questions, and therefore tamper with the questions.
   c. The differing power relationships between enumerators and respondents due to their respective roles and positions in churches, Christian NGOs, or others may lead to different results depending on the particular enumerators.
2. **Respondent-led bias:**
   a. There may be the normal "social desirability" bias of respondents answering with what they think the enumerator wishes to hear, especially in situations where goods and services are being provided or specific theological language is being used.
   b. However, there may also be situations of internalized pressure to answer what the respondent wishes to hear themselves say, rather than the enumerator. This may be particularly true in religious contexts where people are striving to live up to religious expectations.
   c. Some respondents may respond out of the context of having experienced "spiritual trauma" at the hands of pastors, church members, or family members.
   d. More mature Christians may actually respond more negatively about themselves than less mature Christians. For instance, when growing in humility, self-awareness of areas of weakness may cause lower scores - Paul would be a good example of someone who described himself in worse terms as he grew spiritually.

Strategies to Address Response Bias

1. Hiring third parties from the local contexts may help with tackling enumerator bias, as well as helping to ensure the process is transparent and culturally relevant.
2. However, there is some evidence to support that people may share more with those who they know, or who are closer to them in age. Moreover, most communities have formal or informal counselors, including older spiritually mature women, who might make good enumerators.
3. Consider hiring enumerators who are known for not having it all together, who have openly shared about their struggles.
4. When using staff as enumerators, consider allocating different questions to different staff based on their roles and relationships with the respondents.
5. Consider including questions in surveys and interviews that require people to provide concrete examples of the answers they are giving, an approach known as "symptomology."

For Additional Consideration

1. Consider administering the surveys and/or interviews to your own organization to gain a sense of how it feels, the response bias temptations that arise, and what ethically you might want to change.
2. Consider whether and how the questions posed might be communicating a particularly one-sided picture of God, such as a God who values what people do as opposed to a God who wants to commune with people.