What does "Usual" Usually Mean?

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Abstract

The Consumer Expenditure Quarterly Interview survey asks respondents to report their expenses for a three month period. The survey asks about a wide range of expenses, asking specific questions about expenses the household has had in the past three months (e.g.,,, "Since the first of June, how much have you spent on pants?"). These questions require respondents to recall specific purchases and report the details of each.

There are four questions in the interview that are an exception to this pattern of questioning. These questions ask respondents about usual expenditure patterns (e.g., "Since the first of June, what has been your usual weekly expense for groceries?") instead of specific purchases. Respondents are asked to estimate typical spending over a three month period for four expenditures: food at home, food away from home, alcohol at home and alcohol away from home.

Previous research has found respondents use a variety of strategies to answer questions such as these, including recalling each specific episode (Bradburn, Rips and Shevall, 1987), recalling some events and using that information to generalize (Conrad, Brown and Cashman, 1998), using time periods between episodes to estimate (Lessler, Salter and Tourangeau, 1989), or retrieving relevant stored information and making some calculations to adjust it.

This paper explores the strategies 76 participants used when answering questions about usual spending patterns. Additionally, participants" responses were reviewed for evidence that they followed interview instructions, including accounting for the purchases of other household members and using the correct reference period.

Background

Consumer Expenditure Quarterly Interview Survey

The Consumer Expenditure Quarterly Interview (CEQ) survey asks respondents to report their expenses for a three month period. The survey covers all the commodities that people commonly spend their money on, asking specific questions (e.g.,, Since the first of [month, three months ago] have you had any expenses for clothing; ... for vehicle repairs; ... for home maintenance?). These questions require respondents to recall specific purchases and report their details.

In contrast to the preceding approach, four questions in the survey ask about "usual" expenses. These questions ask: Since the first of [month, three months ago], what has been your household"s:

- usual weekly expense for groceries?
- usual weekly expense for food and drinks away from home?
- usual monthly expense for alcohol to be served at home?
- usual monthly expense for alcohol away from home?

These questions require a respondent not only to retrieve from memory information about the frequency of an event and the range of spending, but also to manipulate the retrieved information to produce an estimate of the usual expense (Sudman, Bradburn & Schwarz, 1986). These tasks are often complicated and place a heavy burden on respondents.

Estimation Strategies

For most respondents, it seems safe to assume that answers to the CEQ ,usual" questions are not already stored in memory. Although respondents may be able to recall specific purchases they made (e.g., a refrigerator) they may not know how much they usually spend per week on groceries or alcohol. Therefore, respondents must employ an estimation strategy to be able to arrive at an answer. Researchers have identified a variety of strategies that respondents can use to answer survey questions. The strategies explored in the literature focus on the frequency of an event, which we believe is a key element to the CEQ being considered. This study relies on the assumption that respondents must estimate how often they perform the spending behavior (e.g., going out to dinner) and to be able to estimate how much they spend. Exploration and analysis of the responses to the questions studied will focus on the frequency estimation of the process. The strategies of interest in this paper are shown in Table 1.

One strategy, *rate retrieval*, is when respondents recall the frequency with which an event occurs (e.g., "I always go do my shopping once a week"). This is a general strategy that does not entail the recall of any specific events, instead focusing on the frequency of the event and the general cost associated with that event.

Another rate-related strategy is when respondents think of several specific episodes and use those to generalize to a general frequency (Conrad et al., 1998). This strategy is called *rate and adjustment* in this paper. An example of this would be if a respondent recalled that he had been to happy hour every Thursday and Friday for the past three weeks and generally spends \$20 each time, but knows that he usually goes less often, so he would adjust his twice per week estimate down to once a week.

A similar strategy, termed *single event* in this paper, is to recall a single specific episode and use that to answer the question, skipping the step of generalizing from that single event to a more general frequency or pattern. When asked how much they usually spend on groceries a week, respondents using this strategy may say something like "I spent \$100 the last time I was at the store."

Finally, there are three strategies that rely less on recall of previous behavior than the ones already described. One, specific to expenditure questions, is retrieving a *budget* from memory. Rather than thinking of actual shopping trips or previous expenditures, respondents instead use how much they budget for these expenditure categories (e.g., "I have a weekly eating out budget of \$50). Another strategy, which respondents may not always be willing to admit using, is *guessing*. Sudman, Bradburn and Schwarz (1996) found that guessing most often occurs when a respondent is asked a question that is so general or difficult he or she cannot use any recalled information or knowledge to answer it, and instead provides an answer based on a guess. The third strategy is when respondents are unable, or unwilling, to recall specific information and instead provide an answer by way of some *general impression*. For example a respondent may say "That"s just generally what our grocery bill is" rather than thinking of specific receipts. The frequency with which these three strategies are used may reflect the difficulty of the questions.

Strategy	Definition
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Rate retrieval	Participants retrieve the typical rate of the event
Rate and adjustment	Participants retrieve the typical rate of the event and adjust the number
Single event	Participants use information from a single event
Budget	Participants use their planned budget number as a response
Guess	Participants indicate they guessed
General impression	Participants retrieve a general impression of the event
Guess General impression	Participants indicate they guessed Participants retrieve a general impression of the event

Table 1. Estimation Strategies

It's unclear why respondents use one strategy over another. Blair and Burton (1987, 1991) found that when respondents were dealing with rare events they tended to think of the individual events and count those, but when the events were more frequent, respondents used a more general estimation strategy. Based on their findings, the topic of the question may have a direct relationship to the strategy used, as well as the respondent's behavior patterns or the frequency with which the behavior of interest occurs.

Method

Procedure

This study examined the methods respondents used to arrive at an answer to the four questions about ,usual" expenses included in the CEQ. Testing occurred in four cities, with about a third of the participants coming from Washington, DC (30 percent), a quarter from Richland, Washington (25 percent) or Appleton, Wisconsin (25 percent), and the remaining 20 percent from Albuquerque, New Mexico.

As part of a cognitive interviewing study, 76 participants were asked to answer each of the four CEQ ,usual" expense questions. Following their answers to all four questions, they were asked to explain how they arrived at their answer. General probes (e.g., "Could you tell me more about

that?" and "How did you then use that information?") were used in an attempt to collect details about the estimation strategies used by the participant, asking for as much information as the participants were able to provide.

Analysis

Each response to the four ,usual" questions and the answers given to the follow-up probes were given a code, using a modified version of the scheme described by Sudman et al. (1996). The codes are shown in Table 1. The frequency estimation strategy the respondent used was coded when the participant"s explanation provided enough information to do so. In addition, each response was reviewed to see if the respondent used the correct reference period, included the expenses of other household members, and arrived at any calculations accurately.

Estimation strategies were compared across the four questions, using Chi Square tests, to determine if there were any differences in strategies based on the content of the question. Finally, frequencies were computed for consideration of the reference period, inclusion of other household members" expenses, and calculation errors.

Although every participant provided a response for the grocery question, there were some questions that participants did not answer: 47 percent for alcohol away, 53 percent for alcohol at home and 16 percent for food away. Participants in these cases indicated that they did not usually spend any money on the expenditure category being asked about.

The accuracy of participants" answers was not evaluated in this study. Without external data, such as receipts, to verify an expenditure report, it was not possible to compare an estimate to the true value. The focus instead was on the strategies respondents used to arrive at an answer, and identifying any obvious errors (e.g., calculation errors) they made while considering their response.

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Results

Participant Information

Over half (56.6 percent) of the participants were female. They ranged in age from 21 to 85, with an average age of 53.8. Sixty-one percent of the participants were Caucasian, 22.4 percent were African American, 14.5 percent were Hispanic, with the remaining 1.3 percent being other races.

Unfortunately, demographic information (e.g., household size, income) is not available for all participants as this was a post-hoc research effort. The original data were collected for other purposes, which did not require demographic analysis. Additional demographic variables, which may have been useful in analysis, such as education, were not collected from any participants.

Of the 56.6 percent of participants for whom we had income data, annual household income ranged from less than \$15,000 to more than \$75,000, with the participants relatively evenly divided amongst the income groups (15 percent to 24 percent). Household size ranged from one to six; with the largest percentage (36.8) having two people (Table 2).

Table 2. Household Size

Household Size	Percent of Participants
1	15.8
2	36.8
3 or more	24.9
Missing	22.4

Estimation Strategies

A wide variety of estimation strategies were used across all four questions. Each of the strategies identified in the literature was used by at least one participant (Table 3). Rate and adjustment was the most commonly used strategy for three of the four questions. It was most commonly used in the food away question (53.8 percent), followed by alcohol away (47.5

percent) and alcohol at home (41.7 percent). It was the second most commonly used strategy in the grocery question (19.7 percent).

Rate retrieval was also a frequently used strategy, most often used in the grocery question (27.6 percent) and second most used in the alcohol at home question (22.2 percent) and in the food away (21.5 percent) questions. It was also frequently used in the alcohol away question (20.0 percent).

When looking at the three strategies least based on actual behaviors, we see that respondents were more likely to use the *budget* strategy (15.8 percent) for the grocery question, with more than six percent also using it for the food away question. More than one in ten participants (10.8 percent) admitted that their strategy was to *guess* to obtain their answer to alcohol away question, with a high percent also guessing to arrive at their responses to the grocery (5.3 percent) and alcohol at home (8.3 percent) questions. Finally, the *general impression* strategy was used more often with the grocery question (9.2 percent) than with the other questions; in fact, it was not used at all in either the alcohol away or food away questions.

	Percent Used for		Percent Used for		
Primary Estimation	Grocery	Percent Used for	Alcohol at	Percent Used for	Across all
Strategy	Expenses	Alcohol Away	Home	Food Away	Questions
Rate and Adjustment	19.7	51.4	41.7	60.0	43.2
Rate Retrieval	27.6	13.5	22.2	15.4	19.7
Single Event	6.6	0.0	5.6	0.0	3.0
Budget	15.8	2.7	2.8	6.2	6.9
Guess	5.3	10.8	8.3	1.5	6.5
General Impression	9.2	0.0	2.8	0.0	3.0
Not Enough Information	15.8	21.6	16.7	16.9	17.3

Table 3. Estimation Strategies

To determine if participants tended to use the same estimation strategy regardless of the subject of the question, cross tabulations were run for each of the four questions. Appendix A contains cross-tabulations of the estimation strategy used in each question, and shows the consistency, or lack thereof, of strategies used across each question. There was no statistical relationship between the estimation strategies used on one question and those used on another (p>.05). There were, however, a few trends worth noting.

Across all four questions, the most common strategies used were *rate and adjustment* and *rate retrieval*, and participants were found to switch between the two strategies, using one for one question and another for another question. For example, in the food away question, most (60.0 percent) participants used *rate and adjustment* to arrive at their answer, and used either *rate and adjustment* (18.6 percent) or *rate retrieval* (20.9 percent) to arrive at the answer for the grocery question (Table A-1).

Switching between *rate and adjustment* and *rate retrieval* was a pattern also found between the grocery and alcohol at home questions (Table A-2), between the grocery and food away questions (Table A-3), and between the food away and alcohol at home question (Table A-6). Examining the relationship between the two strategies even further, when looking at the relationship between the strategies used for the grocery and alcohol at home questions (Table A-2), a majority of participants who used *rate and adjustment* in the alcohol at home question used *rate retrieval* in the grocery question.

Estimation Strategy by Household Size

In the CEQ interview, respondents are asked to report expenses for not only themselves, but everyone in their household. Therefore, it is interesting to look at the impact of household size on estimation strategy. It is possible that people with larger households use different strategies as they attempt to consolidate information and generate estimates. However, this was not found to be the case (Table 4), as there was not a statistically significant relationship between

household size and estimation strategy across any of the questions (p>.05). This may be related to the large number of cases (22.4 percent) that were missing household size information. The one interesting finding was that single-person households were much less likely to use a *budget* strategy and less likely to use *rate and adjustment* than those from larger households.

	1	2	3+
	Person	People	People
Rate and adjustment	66.7	33.3	0.0
Rate retrieval	14.8	55.6	29.6
Budget	0.0	66.7	33.3

 Table 4. Estimation Strategy by Household Size (Grocery)

Calculation Errors

While coding the estimation strategies, we identified a percentage (6.5 percent across all questions) of responses that included a calculation error (Table 10). For example, one participant reported that she generally spends \$45 per week on food away from home, and then said the following in explanation "it's usually 18 or 20 for the meal and we do it 4 or 5 times a week."

Table 10. Calculation Errors

Ouestion	Percent of participants making calculation error
Grocery	7.9
Alcohol Away	2.5
Alcohol at Home	2.8
Food Away	9.4
Total	6.5

Looking at each question individually, the most calculation errors were observed within the food away question. In fact, almost ten percent of participants made such an error. This seems reasonable, since from Table 3 we see that most participants used a *rate and adjustment* strategy when arriving at their food away answer, which would require more calculation than a *budget* or *rate retrieval* strategy, which were more common in the grocery question. It's not clear though

why the same does not apply for the alcohol away question, which did not have a high rate of calculation errors.

Inclusion of Other Household Members

Another type of error that participants could make is related to the fact that the questions ask about typical household expenses, so they must include expenditures of other household members in their responses. To explore the extent to which they did this, responses of participants with 2 or more people in their household were coded if there was any reference to another household member (Table 11). Since it is possible that participants may have been considering other household members without explicitly mentioning them in their explanation of their response process (particularly when discussing grocery shopping where respondents may shop alone but make purchases for the entire household), we recognize that this is an imperfect indicator, however we feel it is useful to explore given how thorough most participants were in their explanations.

Overall, we found evidence that a majority of participants did not consider other household members when arriving at their answer, as only 27.1 percent of participants referred to anyone else in their household while explaining how they got to their answer. Looking at each question individually, there was some variance. Participants were most likely to consider other household members when answering the food away question, and least likely to do so when answering the alcohol at home question.

	Percent referring to other
	household members*
Grocery	21.3
Alcohol Away	29.2
Alcohol at Home	19.2
Food Away	37.2
Total	27.1

Table 11. Reference to Other Household Members

*includes only participants with two or more people in their household

Use of Reference Period

Finally, participants" responses were reviewed to see if they gave any indication that they were considering the three month reference period when they thought about their answer (Table 12). Throughout the CEQ, respondents are asked to base their answers on a three month reference period and were so instructed during these interviews. As with the reference to other household members, we acknowledge that participants may have thought of the reference period without mentioning it in their explanation; but again we feel it is worth analyzing given the tendency of participants to be thorough in their explanation.

Overall, participants mentioned the three month reference period about half the time (53.9 percent). There was variation across the questions. More specifically, participants were least likely to mention the reference period when explaining their alcohol away answers, and most likely to do so for the food away question.

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	Percent referring to
	reference period
Grocery	44.7
Alcohol Away	42.5
Alcohol at Home	58.3
Food Away	69.2
Total	53.9

Table 12. Reference to 3-month Reference Period

Conclusions

This study revealed some new information about how respondents may answer the four CEQ questions about "usual" expenses, and identified some possible errors that might affect the collected data. These findings have implications for questionnaire design and respondent instructions for these, or similar, questions. Overall, we can conclude that respondents don't usually arrive at answers to these types of "usual" the same way.

Overall, respondents used a wide variety of estimation strategies to answer the questions, though *rate and adjustment* and *rate retrieval* were the most common. With the exception of moving between *rate and adjustment* and *rate retrieval*, there was no association between the strategies used and question topic. Respondents inconsistently changed strategies between the questions.

To the extent that some strategies provide more accurate responses than others, the failure to use the strategies which produce the most accurate data will affect the quality of the data obtained. Since this study found that participants did not use the same strategy for each question, their answers to some questions may be more accurate than to others. The answers of some participants, those using the "strategies, may be more accurate than the answers of other participants (e.g., one respondent overestimates the number of times he or she went to the grocery store when using the *rate and adjustment* method while another is not able to remember all the grocery store visits and underestimates his or her spending using the *rate retrieval* method).

Additionally, taking advantage of the strategies respondents are likely to use to answer questions could reduce respondent burden and/or improve response accuracy. Grouping questions by strategy type might make it easier for respondents to transition from one question to another. Asking the question in multiple parts (e.g., How often do you go grocery shopping? How much do you typically spend?), might also make the questions easier for respondents to answer.

Although there weren't any statistically significant association between household size and strategy (p>.05), we did find as household size increased the percentage of participants using the *budget* or *rate retrieval* strategies decreased. This may suggest that these strategies are not sophisticated enough estimate responses to these questions given the more complex situation of a multi-person household.

Calculation errors were most common in the food away question, where most respondents used the *rate and adjustment* strategy. This strategy has respondents considering how often they perform an action and then adjusting that recalled information, so it requires more mental calculation than other strategies (e.g., *rate retrieval* where no adjustment is done). Asking the question in two parts, having the respondent first provide the typical rate, and then asking for the adjusted rate (and associated expense), may also reduce calculation errors by allowing the interviewer to aid the respondent in their calculations.

Not accounting for expenditures of other household members is another problem identified in this study. Although the participants were instructed at the beginning of the interview to include all household members in their answers, and the question specifically asked about "your household," a significant percentage of participants made no reference to anyone other than themselves when answering the questions. This suggests that more prompting may be required during the actual interview to remind respondents that they are reporting for the entire household.

There was variability in how often participants included other household members" expenditures; with alcohol and groceries having the lowest percentage of participants mentioning other

household members in their responses, and food away having the highest percentage. This difference may be related to the nature of the behaviors in question; it seems logical that participants shop for groceries and alcohol alone but eat out with other family members. When considering how to improve these questions to encourage respondents to more often include other household members, we could instead ask the question for each household member individually (though that requires proxy reporting, which has its own issues), or rephrase the questions and instructions to emphasize the necessity of including everyone in the household in their response.

Finally, the CEQ collects data about the three months preceding the interview, an instruction that all participants were given before the interview. This study found that few participants indicated they were thinking about the three month reference period when estimating their answers. As with the inclusion of other household members' expenditures, this varied across the questions, participants were most likely to mention the reference period with the food and alcohol away from home questions. Again, this seems reasonable due to the nature of these questions, eating and drinking out of the house are likely to be more irregular events than grocery shopping, and so perhaps participants used the reference period to help them think of the frequency with which they engaged in these behaviors.

It is unclear how much, if any, impact not using the reference period poses. It depends to some degree on the regularity of the expenses. If respondents tend to spend the same amount on groceries or food away from home regardless of the time of year, then the time period they"re considering when answering the questions doesn"t matter. If, however, respondents tend to spend more on food or alcohol during certain time periods, their estimates will be inaccurate if they do not use the specified reference period when arriving at their answers.

For a variety of reasons, use of the four "usual" questions in the Consumer Expenditure Quarterly Survey appears problematic. More than five percent (6.5 percent) of respondents admitted that they simply guessed when arriving at their answers to these four questions. Of the respondents who used more sophisticated strategies, few used the same method to generate their answers in the same way across all the questions, and many made errors in both calculation and inclusion (expenditures of other household members and use of reference period) when responding. This study found evidence to support a redesign of these questions, in addition to providing more insights into the processes respondents use when answering such questions.

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Appendix A: Cross-Tabulations of Estimation Strategies by Question¹

	Food Away Estimation Strategy							
Grocery Estimation Strategy	Rate and adjustment	Rate retrieval	Single event	Budget	Guess	General Impression	Total	
Rate and adjustment	7.0	0.0	0.0	2.3	0.0	2.3	11.6	
Rate retrieval	2.3	2.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.6	
Single event	4.7	4.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.4	
Budget	9.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.3	
Guess	18.6	7.0	0.0	4.7	0.0	0.0	30.3	
General Impression	20.9	14.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	34.9	
Total	62.8	28.0	0.0	7.0	0.0	2.3	100.0	

Table A-1. Estimation Strategies across Grocery and Food Away (n=40)

Table A-2. Estimation Strategies across Grocery and Alcohol at Home (n=36)

	Alcohol at Home Estimation Strategy							
Grocery Estimation Strategy	Rate and adjustment	Rate retrieval	Single event	Budget	Guess	General Impression	Total	
Rate and adjustment	4.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.2	
Rate retrieval	4.2	0.0	8.3	0.0	0.0	8.3	20.8	
Single event	25.0	20.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.2	50	
Budget	4.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.2	
Guess	4.2	8.3	0.0	0.0	4.2	0.0	16.7	
General Impression	4.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.2	
Total	46.0	29.1	8.3	0.0	4.2	12.5	100.0	

¹ Row and column totals do not match Table 3 due to missing data.

	Alcohol Away Estimation Strategy							
Grocery Estimation Strategy	Rate and adjustment	Rate retrieval	Single event	Budget	Guess	General Impression	Total	
Rate and adjustment	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	3.3	13.3	
Rate retrieval	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	20.0	6.7	26.7	
Single event	3.3	0.0	10.0	0.0	16.7	3.3	33.3	
Budget	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.7	3.3	10	
Guess	0.0	0.0	3.3	0.0	6.7	0.0	10	
General Impression	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.7	6.7	
Total	3.3	0.0	13.3	0.0	60.1	23.3	100.0	

 Table A-3. Estimation Strategies across Grocery and Alcohol Away (n=65)

Table A-4. Estimation Strategies across Alcohol at Home and Alcohol Away (n=36)

	Alcohol Away Estimation Strategy							
Alcohol at Home Estimation Strategy	Rate and adjustment	Rate retrieval	Single event	Budget	Guess	General Impression	Total	
Rate and adjustment	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0	
Rate retrieval	6.3	25.0	18.8	6.3	0.0	6.3	62.7	
Single event	6.3	12.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	18.8	
Budget	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0	
Guess	0.0	0.0	6.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.3	
General Impression	0.0	6.3	0.0	6.3	0.0	0.0	12.6	
Total	12.6	43.8	25.1	12.6	0.0	6.3	100.0	

	Food Away Estimation Strategy						
Alcohol Away Estimation Strategy	Rate and adjustment	Rate retrieval	Single event	Budget	Guess	General Impression	Total
Rate and adjustment	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0
Rate retrieval	0.0	7.7	0.0	23.1	0.0	38.5	69.3
Single event	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.7	0.0	7.7	15.4
Budget	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0
Guess	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.8	0.0	0.0	3.8
General Impression	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.8	0.0	7.7	11.5
Total	0.0	7.7	0.0	38.4	0.0	53.9	100.0

 Table A-5. Estimation Strategies across Alcohol Away and Food Away (n=65)

Table A-6. Estimation Strategies across Food Away and Alcohol at Home (n=65)

	Alcohol at Home Estimation Strategy						
Food Away Estimation Strategy	Rate and adjustment	Rate retrieval	Single event	Budget	Guess	General Impression	Total
Rate and adjustment	0.0	0.0	7.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.7
Rate retrieval	15.4	0.0	30.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	46.2
Single event	15.4	0.0	11.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	26.9
Budget	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.8	3.8
Guess	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.8	3.8
General Impression	7.7	0.0	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	11.5
Total	38.5	0.0	53.8	0.0	0.0	7.6	100.0