

Do survey respondents lie?

Situated cognition and socially desirable responding

A discussion without lies

David Cantor, Westat

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Types of Sensitive Questions

- Three types of sensitive questions (Tourangeau and Yan, 2007)
 - > Questions that are intrusive (e.g., income)
 - > Questions that involve threat of disclosure (e.g., illegal behavior).
 - > Social Desirability - Answers are socially unacceptable or socially desirable.
- The talk concentrates on social desirability, with some reference to other types of sensitive questions

Response Process and Sensitive Questions

- In the survey literature, different parts of the response process have been emphasized as primary explanation for response error (Schaeffer, 2000; Tourangeau et al, 2000; Tourangeau and Yan, 2007).
 - > Selectively encode information into memory
 - > Selectively retrieve from memory
 - > “Motivated misreporting” (Tourangeau and Yan, 2007)

Schwarz: Context is overlooked

- Situational context can explain responses
 - > How strong is the belief; how much has the R thought about it?
 - > What are the contextual cues
 - > Survey response is influenced by what is being processed by the R at the time of the interview
- A key element is the strength of the belief or memory

Moves away from attributing motives

- It uses a general framework of response behavior without attributing motives to respondent's intents
- The argument is not an all or nothing proposition
 - > Both motivated misreporting and context effects can apply
 - > Especially for attitude objects or behaviors that are not well defined for the respondent.
 - > Continuum seems appropriate

Evidence

- Context effects for self-administered questionnaires
- Implicit Attitude Measurement –
 - > Test of conscious and subconscious processing is intriguing
 - > Not clear how this applies to a survey
- How important is it to know which it is? Isn't it enough to understand how the response is determined in reaction to the context?

How does it apply for intrusive questions?

- Survey Practice: Put the behavior into a favorable light in order to reduce the stigma that might occur when answering the question
 - > Sexual behavior among same-sex partners (Catania, et al, 1996)
 - > Sexual Assault and Rape (Tjaeden and Thoennes, 2000; CDC, 2011)
- Not a great deal of empirical evidence that supports this approach (e.g. Peter and Valkenburg, 2011).

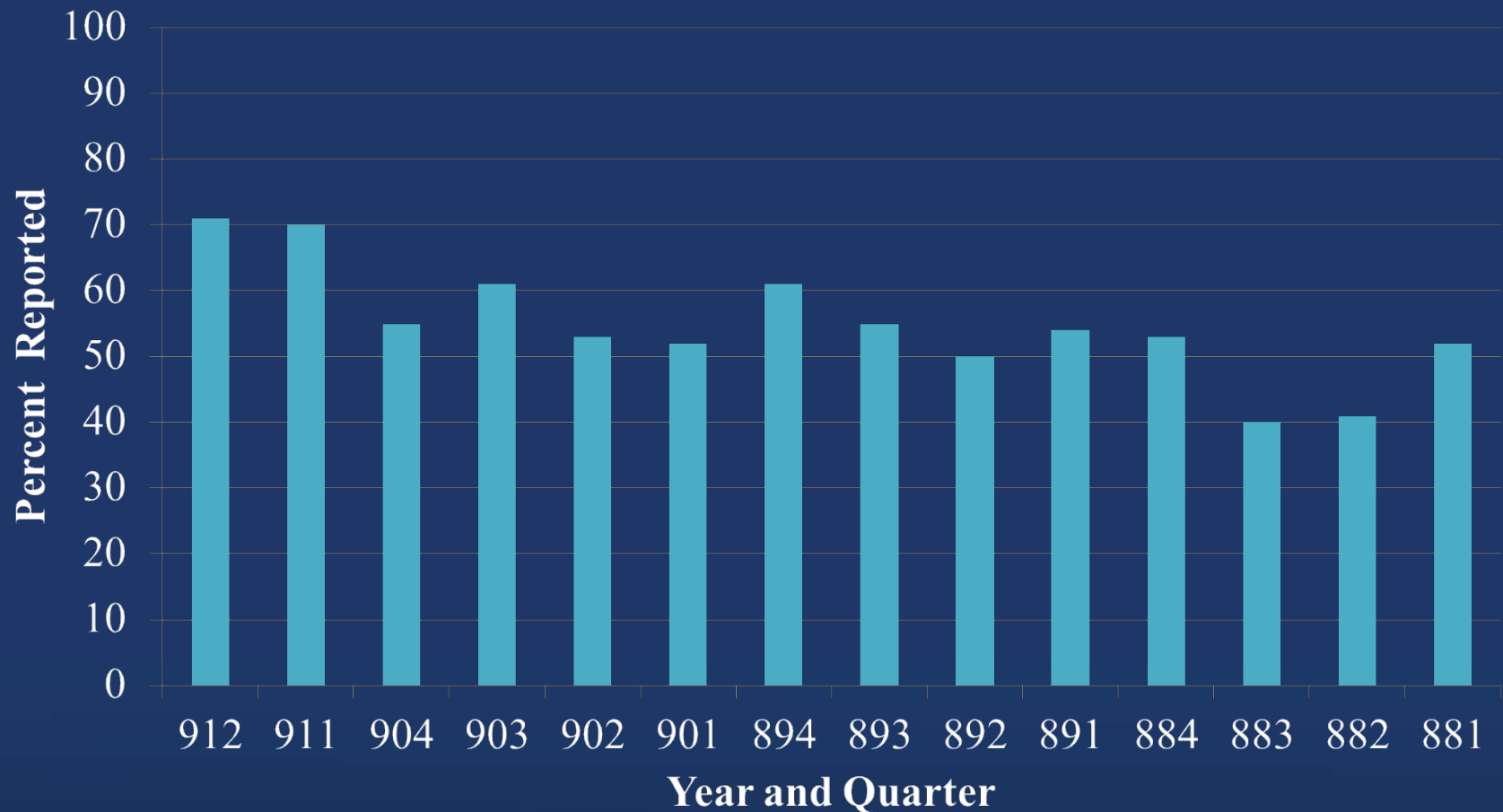
What do we know about deliberate misreporting?

- Reports of sensitive behaviors increase when perceptions of anonymity go up (self-administered questionnaires; randomized response).
- We don't know very much about the size of the effect of motivated misreporting on error
 - > Most studies of sensitive behaviors rely on comparing outcomes under different survey conditions
 - > Does the treatment significantly improve validity?

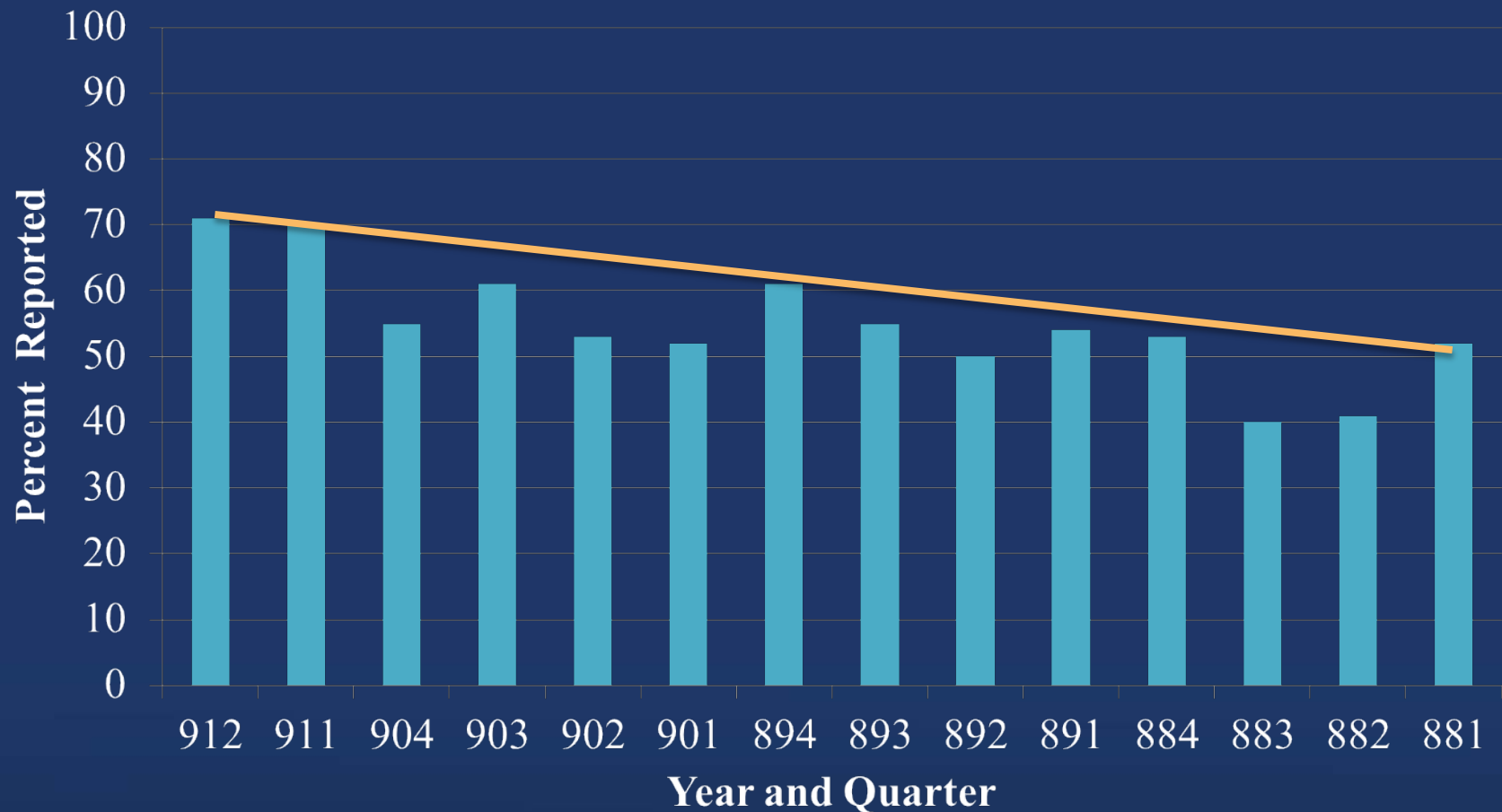
What about other parts of the response process?

- How does memory affect reporting of behavior?
 - > telescoping error (over-reporting) vs. omissions
 - > How has the memory been encoded, stored and changed?
Can this be affected by situational context (e.g., long term memories)?

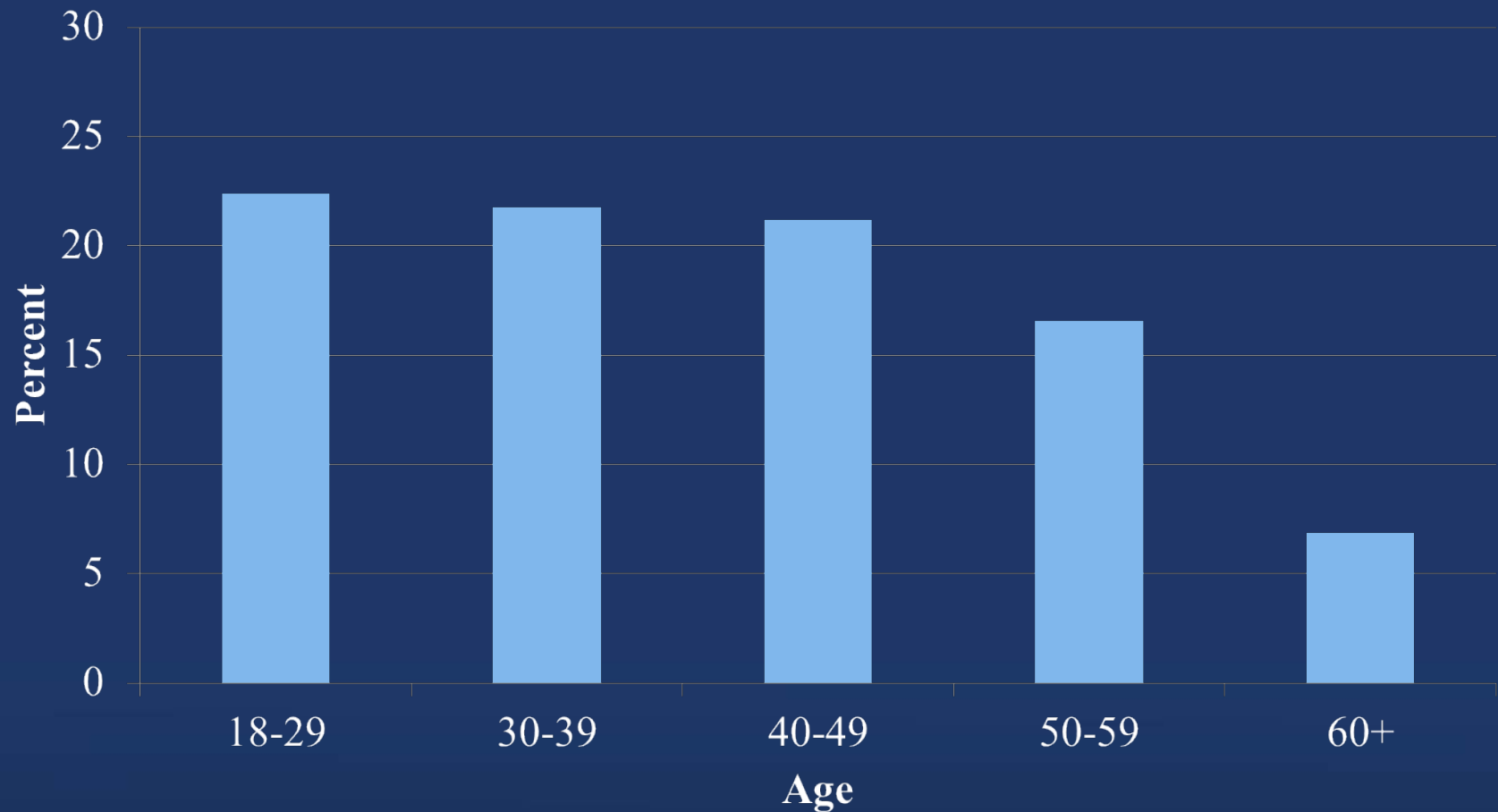
Percent of Positive Drug Tests Reported During Interview by Collection Quarter (Cantor, et al 1996)



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Lifetime Prevalence of Rape Among US Women by Age (Tjaeden and Thoennes, 2000)



Effects across different populations and situations

- Sensitive questions are used across a wide range of topics and study areas
 - > General population
 - > Adult and juvenile criminal offenders
 - > Drug users
 - > Surveys of Teachers, Principals (e.g., best practices).
- Role of context and deliberate misreporting varies across these groups

Solutions need to be expanded and elaborated

- Self-administration; “kinder and gentler language”
- Need additional research on how these solutions interact with other types of response error.
 - > Are there populations or situations where anonymity may have some downsides?
 - > Example: Reports of Sexual Assault among incarcerated offenders. Is there some motivation to over-report?
 - > When does setting the context to promote reporting work?