Do survey respondents lie?

Situated cognition and socially desirable responding

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Tacit assumptions of survey research

- People know what they do
- Know what they believe
- Can report on it “with candor and accuracy”

Angus Campbell, 1981
Tacit assumptions of survey research

• Researcher’s task
  – Allow for accuracy
    • Ask reasonable questions
  – Allow for candor
    • Confidentiality
    • Anonymity

• Research efforts focused on these tasks
Some doubts

• Discrepancies
  – Between behavioral records and reports
  – Between reports given in different contexts
    • Interviewers
    • Sponsor
    • Question order

• Interpretation
  – They don’t tell you what they know ("desirability")
  – They didn’t do the work ("satisficing")
Suppose they don’t know…

- Memory and judgment are highly constructive
  - Facts and beliefs not simply “retrieved”

- Answers formed when asked
  - Based on what comes to mind at that time
  - Strong contextual influences

- How these “constructions” work is central theme in psychology
Perhaps they don’t lie?

• Discrepancies may not reflect “lying”
  – i.e., deliberate misrepresentation despite better knowledge

• May be “honest” answers
  – The best they can do in context

• Differential implications for measurement
But how would we know?
Attitude reports

• Reports of “sensitive” attitudes shift as a function of social context
  – E.g., racial attitudes & race of interviewer

• Are these effects obtained even when self-presentation is irrelevant?
  – No reason for desirable self-presentation
    • Full anonymity
      – Measure not transparent, allowing no insight into how one presents oneself
        • Implicit attitude measures
The case of racial attitudes
Race of interviewer

Key finding

• White respondents report more favorable attitudes towards Blacks as a group when the interviewer is Black.

• Black respondents report more favorable attitudes towards Whites as a group when the interviewer is White.
Race of interviewer

- Samuel Stouffer’s (1950) World War II surveys
  - Attitudes related to race and conflict vary by race of interviewer
  - Can’t separate race per se from differences in interviewer behavior
  - Nor can later studies
Race of interviewer

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Race of interviewer

To accept a guest into your house and then explain that you neither trust nor feel friendly toward people of their race probably takes more chutzpah than the average respondent possesses

H. Schuman & J. Converse (1971)
Race of interviewer effects

Two main arguments

• Politeness
  – You don’t tell members of the other group

• Social desirability
  – You don’t tell anyone (unless you’re sure they agree with you)

• = Respondents tell a deliberate lie
  – To maintain a smooth interaction
  – To present themselves in a positive light
Some doubts
Summers & Hammond, *Social Forces*, 1966

- White undergrads complete anonymous self-administered questionnaire
- Handed out by two helpers
  - Both white
  - One black & one white
- More favorable racial attitudes in presence of a black person
  - Who does not see the answers
- “Mere presence” effect
• White respondents in web survey;
  – Text & image only

• “Virtual interviewer” is black or white

Hello, I'm a researcher at the University of Michigan. This short survey is about a variety of social issues facing the country. I look forward to hearing your opinions on these topics.
A picture will do

- Less stereotypical perceptions of African Americans when “virtual interviewer” (= picture) is black

- Exception: R’s see racial discrimination as less of a problem when several black interviewers are shown
Social presence?

• It does not take “social presence” with the chance of embarrassment

• “Mere presence” is enough

• Even a picture will do!
The thought is enough
Who comes to mind
Bodenhausen, Schwarz, Bless, & Wanke, *JESP*, 1995

- Participants estimate the height of 4 celebrities (Experiment 2)
- List includes
  - No African American
  - One highly liked African American (pretested)
    - E.g., Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey
- Racial attitude questions in later questionnaire
  - Items from Modern Racism scale
  - High score = very adverse beliefs (0-9)
Adverse racial beliefs
Bodenhausen, Schwarz, Bless, & Wanke, JESP, 1995

![Bar chart showing adverse racial beliefs with values 3.4 for No AA and 2.3 for One Liked AA.](chart.png)
Positive effects of positive exemplars

• If a liked exemplar is brought to mind, the group is evaluated more favorably
  – Exemplar included in temporary representation formed of the group

• In absence of any incentives for self-presentation or politeness

• Negative attitudes are based on chronic accessibility of negative exemplars
  – Which dominate media coverage
Negative effects of positive exemplars

- Negative contextual influences occur at the same time

- Other individual members of the group are evaluated less favorably
  - Contrasted to exemplar
  - Unless you know little about them

- Highly respected members help the group, but hurt their peers
  - Bless, Schwarz, Bodenhausen, & Thiel, *JESP*, 2000
• Martin Luther King Day brings to mind
  – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
  – Positive norms about race relations

• Judgment logic
  – Helps group, hurts individual members

• Desirability logic
  – The norm activation helps all
  – At least on that day you should get with the program…
• Web experiment around MLK Day 2004

• Students randomly assigned to time
  – Monday 2 weeks before MLK day
  – On MLK day
  – Monday 2 weeks after MLK day

• Attitudes
  – Towards African Americans as group
  – Towards Colin Powell

• High numbers = positive evaluation (1-9)
MLK Day
Konrath & Schwarz, 2005

Before | MLK | After
---|---|---
Group: 4.5 | 5.3 | 4.6
Powell: 6.4 | 5.7 | 6.3
Summary

• Exposure to liked exemplar produces:
  – More positive evaluations of the group
  – More negative evaluations of individual members
    • “He’s no MLK…”

• Under conditions of full anonymity & no interracial interaction
  – Minimal social desirability / politeness pressure
Summary

• Krysan & Couper’s “virtual interviewers” are positive exemplars

• So is the interviewer in your living room

This short survey for the University of Michigan is about a variety of social issues facing the country. Your opinions on these topics are highly valued.
No social presence needed

• “Race-of-interviewer” effects can be obtained
  – Without an interviewer
  – Under full anonymity
  – With mere symbolic exposure to positive exemplars
No social presence needed

• Thinking of any African American you like is enough for
  – more favorable evaluation of the group
  – less favorable evaluations of other individual African Americans

• Same holds for any other group (or non-social category)

• Review:
  – Bless & Schwarz, Adv Exp Soc Psych, 2010
Lying to yourself?
Lying to yourself?

• Survey researchers: they lie to us
  – They know what they think, but don’t tell us.

• Psychologists: they lie to themselves
  – Perhaps they don’t even want to admit their racist attitudes to themselves?
  – If so, anonymity is not the answer
Lying to yourself?

• Needed are nontransparent measures

• If you don’t know what you reveal, you don’t have to confront your own nasty self
Implicit attitude measures

• Promise to capture people’s “true” attitude even if
  – They don’t want to tell
  – May not want to admit it to themselves
  – May not even know it

• How does that magic work?
How does the magic work?

- Overview: Wittenbrink & Schwarz (Eds.), *Implicit measures of attitudes*. NY: Guilford, 2007

- Measures not transparent
- Participants not aware what they reveal
- Responses (mostly) outside of strategic control
Evaluative priming measures
Fazio et al., *JPSP*, 1986

- Is it a **good** or a **bad** word?
- Decide as fast as possible
- Of interest
  - Good words faster after white primes?
  - Bad words faster after black primes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prime</th>
<th>Positive Word</th>
<th>Negative Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Pleasant</td>
<td>Awful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>etc</td>
<td>etc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How would you lie on this?

- Requires insight into task
- Awareness of the prime you didn’t see
- Control over speed of response

“To avoid looking like a racist, I should be fast with good words and slow with bad words when the thing I cannot see is a black person. But when the thing I cannot see is a white person, I should do the opposite.”
# Implicit Associations Test

Greenwald et al., *JPSP*, 1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Left key</th>
<th>Right key</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Flower</td>
<td>Insect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Flower OR</td>
<td>Insect OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Flower OR</td>
<td>Insect OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bad OR Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- See words or pictures
- Hit proper key as fast as you can
- Measure of interest:
  - Speed of #3 vs. speed of #5
  - The more you like flowers and hate insects, the greater the difference
How would you lie on this?

• Requires insight into task
  – Differential speed of categorizing valence congruent vs. valence incongruent targets

• Control over speed of response

“To not look like a racist, I should be slower when they pair bad stuff with black people than when they pair good stuff with black people. For white people I have to do the opposite.”
The surprise
New measures, same story

• Same context sensitivity!

• Under conditions, where people wouldn’t easily know how to “lie”

• Review:
  – Ferguson & Bargh, in Wittenbrink & Schwarz, 2007
Exemplar effects on IAT
Dasgupta & Greenwald, JPSP, 2001, Exp 1

- See pictures of exemplars
  - Control pix (objects)
  - Pro-White: Liked Whites + disliked Blacks
  - Pro-Black: Liked Blacks + disliked Whites

- Do IAT
Race of Experimenter
Lowery et al., *JPSP*, 2001

- Experimenter who greets you is Black vs. White
- Decide if word is “good” or “bad”
  - Preceded by White or Black face prime
- No social presence
  - Nobody in room
  - Anonymous
  - Confidential
Race-of-interviewer without the interviewer

• Findings parallel race-of-interviewer effects
  – Under full anonymity & confidentiality
  – On measures where you don’t even know what you disclose
    • To others or to yourself

• Hard to reconcile with
  – Politeness
  – Deliberate self-presentation to others
  – Hiding your true feelings from yourself
What does it mean?

Attitude construction
Situated & pragmatic

“My thinking is first and last and always for the sake of my doing.” (1890)

William James
Situated & pragmatic

• We do things here & now, in specific contexts

• To guide “doing-in-context”, our judgments should...
  – …be informed by past experience
  – …but sensitive to the specifics of the present
  – …overweight recent experience
  – …overweight experience from similar situations
  – …take current goals into account
Situated & pragmatic

- Only context-sensitive judgment can guide behavior in an adaptive way
  - Alert us to problems and opportunities when they exist
  - Interrupt ongoing processes when needed, but not otherwise
  - Support fast responding by making information accessible that is relevant now

- "Stable" = context-insensitive attitudes are problematic in daily life
Situated & pragmatic

• This context sensitivity is good for you

• Unless you wear your survey hat
  – Context dependency

• An adaptive feature turns into a problem because we’re chasing an illusion
• Attitude reports reflect evaluations in context
  – Not stable “dispositions” or things people “know”

• Stable when evaluative implications of inputs are similar over time

• Variable when evaluative implications of inputs vary

• Observed contextual variation reflects changes in judgment, not (necessarily) “lying”
Set size effects

• Judgment at t1 depends on what comes to mind

• A given piece of information X has less influence, the more other information comes to mind

• Implication
  – The more you know about the attitude object, the smaller the race-of-interviewer effect
The “Bradley effect”

- Voters are more likely to say they will vote for a black candidate than to do it.
  - Named after LA Mayor Tom Bradley
  - Lost 1982 CA gubernatorial race despite being ahead in the polls

- Poll reports in favor of black candidate more pronounced when interviewer is black
• The less people know about the attitude object (Obama), the more they rely on general information about the category (Blacks)

• Race of interviewer influenced Obama judgments from February to June 2008
  – Most so for Democrats
  – Republicans have a neutral political reason

• As knowledge about Obama increases, race of interviewer effects disappear
  – None in CBS polls during main campaign
How about behavioral reports?
Theory-driven reconstruction

• They don’t know what they do
  – Memory is reconstructive
  – Reconstruction influenced by research instrument

• Same ambiguity applies
  – Do they know what they did and not tell us?
  – Or is the reconstruction of what they “must have done” influenced by context?
  – Or both?
Theory-driven reconstruction

• Likely to depend on behavior
  – “Really” bad behavior more memorable & less desirable
  – “Kind of” bad behavior less memorable & fewer worries

• Any higher report of “bad” behaviors under conditions of high confidentiality can reflect
  – Influence of self-presentation concerns
  – Differential inferences
  – A mix of both -- perhaps for different people
Implications for accuracy

• If they lie, we want to keep doing what we do
  – Increase confidentiality

• If the information provided by our efforts feeds into their reconstruction, we want to adjust the strategy
  – Contextual cues inflate reports of moderately bad behaviors of low memorability
  – But not of very bad behaviors

• We better find out
So what?
Do respondents lie?

• Yes, sometimes

• But it is surprisingly hard to know
  – Takes more than observation of contextual influences
  – Takes more than higher reports under confidentiality

• The “classic” example – race of interviewer – may be one of the worst we have
Socially desirable responding needs a new look???