Replications and Refinements

Under this heading are brief reports of studies providing data that substantiate, disprove, or refine what we think we know. These Notes consist of a summary of the study’s procedure and as many details about the results as space allows. Additional details concerning the results can be obtained by communicating directly with the author.

Application of Conversational Norms to the Interpretation of Survey Results as a Function of Participants’ Need for Cognition

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INDIVIDUALS ENGAGED IN CONVERSATION are expected to follow conversational norms or unwritten rules about communication. One such norm is to avoid redundancy: information should not be repeated during a conversation. Survey respondents and other research participants sometimes conceptualize their participation as though they are engaged in a conversation with researchers. That is, participants assume that when researchers ask a series of seemingly related questions, each question is a unique inquiry—just as in a conversation a follow-up question implies a request for additional information or clarification. Consequently, participants respond so as not to provide redundant answers.

Although such conversational norms may be operative in any situation, when a respondent is answering a series of related questions (for example, completing a

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personality inventory) survey researchers may inadvertently make such conversational norms more salient by using a joint lead-in statement to introduce the research. For example, if a researcher calls a woman at her home, he might ask her if she would be willing to answer several questions about her satisfaction with the president’s performance. This introductory request (a joint lead-in) creates a context that may influence the participant’s interpretation of the specific questions. Similarly, joint lead-in statements frequently accompany mail surveys that are sent to respondents’ homes (“Please complete the enclosed questionnaire concerning your evaluation of your local representative’s performance”). In laboratory settings, the consent form that describes the proposed research may be an additional factor that highlights the conversational context in which the research occurs.

Regardless of whether a joint lead-in is made explicit to survey respondents, researchers have demonstrated that specific questions alter the responses given to subsequent general questions in questionnaires used in a variety of domains (see Schwarz, Groves, & Schuman, 1998, for a review). These domains include public opinion research on policies regarding various social groups (e.g., Ottati, Riggle, Wyer, Schwarz, & Kuklinski, 1989) and politicians (see Schwarz et al., 1998, for a review), as well as research in positive psychology, which examines factors associated with general happiness and life satisfaction (see Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999, and Schwarz & Strack, 1999, for reviews of methodological issues relevant to positive psychology).

Researchers have assumed that participants automatically apply the avoid redundancy conversational norm to the research setting (Schwarz, Strack, & Mai, 1991). This assumption is qualified in the present replication and extension of Schwarz et al.

Schwarz et al. (1991) asked participants to evaluate aspects of their lives from very dissatisfied (1) to very satisfied (11). In one condition, participants first reported their general life satisfaction then answered questions about specific aspects of their lives (including relationship satisfaction). In another condition, participants first answered a specific question (regarding relationship satisfaction), then a general life satisfaction question. A joint lead-in (“We would first like to ask you to report on two aspects of your life, which may be relevant to people’s overall well-being”) informed participants that the specific and general questions were part of the same conversational context. An attenuated correlation between the specific and general life satisfaction questions was observed in this joint lead-in (JL) condition, compared with no joint lead-in (NJL) condition in which the general question preceded the specific question.

Schwarz et al. (1991) concluded that the attenuated correlation between questions in the JL condition was because the JL participants applied the avoid redundancy norm. That is, JL participants assumed that the general question excluded the specific aspect (relationship satisfaction) they had rated previously, as researchers are not expected to repeat questions. Consequently, JL participants responded differently to the two questions, whereas NJL participants did not.
High need-for-cognition (HNC) individuals derive greater enjoyment from thinking and are more motivated to think than low need-for-cognition (LNC) individuals (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). If conversational norms are applied automatically, everyone should apply them consistently. However, we hypothesized that LNC participants (people who do not think unless the situation requires it) may not always follow conversational norms, because this application is not automatic. Therefore, when the avoid redundancy norm was relevant (JL), we expected HNC participants to be more influenced (attenuated correlation) than LNC participants, whereas there would be no difference when the norm was irrelevant (NJL).

One hundred seventy-seven undergraduates at a large southwestern university participated. We replicated the Schwarz et al. (1991) procedure exactly. As in Schwarz et al., we randomly assigned participants to question-order condition (JL vs. NJL). Additionally, all participants completed the Need for Cognition Scale (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982).

A median split was performed on participants’ Need for Cognition Scale scores (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982; possible scores range from −72 to +72). Forty-nine percent of participants received NC scores higher than 21 and were classified as HNC; 51% received NC scores lower than or equal to 21 and were classified as LNC.

Following the Schwarz et al. (1991) procedure, we essentially created a 2 (Question Format: JL vs. NJL) × 2 (Need for Cognition: High vs. Low) between-subjects design. The dependent variable was the correlation between participants’ overall life satisfaction and their satisfaction with their relationships. To determine whether the effect of question format on the correlation between relationship and life satisfaction varied as a function of need-for-cognition, we compared the relationship–life satisfaction correlations within conditions by using a Fisher’s r-to-z transformation. As expected, HNC participants displayed an attenuated correlation between satisfaction ratings when presented in the JL format, \( r(40) = .48, p < .002; z = 1.97, p < .05 \). Also as predicted, a similar attenuation pattern was not obtained in the NJL format, \( r(40) = .40, p < .01, \) for HNC; \( r(48) = .45, p < .002, \) for LNC; \( z = .27, ns. \)

Contrary to the prevailing assumption, our results suggest that the avoid redundancy conversational norm is not automatically applied in survey contexts. Only participants who were particularly engaged in the research process (those who tend to enjoy thinking much of the time, HNC participants) adhered to the avoid redundancy norm and were influenced by the question format. Research participants are differentially motivated to think, and unless researchers include some measure of motivation to think (e.g., need-for-cognition), there is no way of knowing how participants will respond to questions presented with joint lead-ins. Consequently, researchers should avoid using joint lead-ins in their surveys whenever possible.

However, given that many types of survey situations may naturally create a salient conversational context either by the nature of soliciting participants’
responses (e.g., requesting that a person complete a survey over the phone or through the mail, or by providing informed consent for laboratory research) or by the nature of the questions themselves (e.g., seemingly related items on a personality inventory), researchers may do well to instruct participants to treat items independently and to try to avoid thinking of the items as being part of a conversational context.

Future research is needed to explore whether participants can deliberately ignore the conversational context. Given that our findings demonstrate that the application of the avoid redundancy norm is not automatic, it should be possible to reduce the norm’s impact by providing participants with appropriate instructions.

Furthermore, the present results suggest that the assumption that survey respondents automatically apply other conversational norms (suggesting that communicators be “informative, truthful, relevant, and clear,” Schwarz, 1994, p. 125) may not withstand rigorous empirical investigation.

REFERENCES


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