

### "No opinion"-filters: a cognitive perspective

Hippler, Hans-Jürgen; Schwarz, Norbert

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## 'NO OPINION'-FILTERS: A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE\*

*Hans J. Hippler, Norbert Schwarz*

### ABSTRACT

Research on the use of 'no opinion'-filters suggests that respondents are the less likely to offer a substantive response the more strongly the filter question is worded. A series of experiments is reported that demonstrates that filter questions influence respondents' perception of their task: the more strongly the filter question is worded, the more respondents assume that they will have to answer difficult questions, and that they may not have the required knowledge. Accordingly, filter questions discourage respondents from offering global opinions that they may hold. In line with this assumption, all respondents who reported not having an opinion in response to a filter question, subsequently provided substantive responses on a global opinion question—presumably because the global question asked was less demanding than expected on the basis of the filter. Analyses of these substantive responses indicated that respondents who initially reported not having an opinion differed from respondents who reported having one. Methodological implications of these findings for the use of filter questions and for research on the nature of 'floating' are discussed.

### CONSEQUENCES OF 'NO OPINION'-FILTERS

The major goal of public opinion research is the description of opinions held by a population. Accordingly, public opinion researchers frequently attempt to screen out respondents who do not hold an opinion on the issue under study because they assume that these respondents may provide meaningless responses. To accomplish this screening task, they developed a variety of filter questions that allow the identification of respondents who do not hold an opinion.

This methodological research resulted in some of the most reliable findings in the area of question wording (cf. Schuman and Presser, 1981; Sudman and Bradburn, 1974 for reviews). In general, respondents are more likely to report not having an opinion on an issue when this alternative is explicitly offered as

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part of a 'filtered' question, than when it has to be volunteered in response to the 'standard form' of the question that does not explicitly offer a 'don't know' response alternative. If a 'don't know' option is offered, the increase in 'no opinion' responses depends on the specific form of the filter used. Generally, the use of a so called 'quasi-filter' results in smaller increases than the use of a 'full-filter'. In the former case, a 'no opinion' option is offered as part of a precoded set of response alternatives, whereas in the latter case respondents are explicitly asked whether they have an opinion on the issue before the interviewer proceeds to ask the question proper. Finally, the increase in 'don't know' responses to a full filter depends on the strength of the wording of the filter question, with stronger wordings resulting in higher rates of no opinion responses. For example, more respondents provide a substantive answer when the filter question is worded, 'Do you have an opinion on this?', than when it is worded, 'Have you thought enough about this to have an opinion?'. Several processes are likely to contribute to these findings.

### CONVERSATIONAL NORMS

From the perspective of conversational norms, the mere fact that a person is asked a question presupposes that the person can answer it (cf. Belnap and Steel, 1976; Clark, 1985; Grice, 1975 for a general discussion, and Strack and Martin, 1987 for applications to survey methodology). Thus, responding that one has no opinion is an illegitimate answer to an opinion question that respondents are unlikely to give unless the question indicates its legitimacy. In the survey interview, this effect of communication norms is likely to be enhanced by respondents' assumption that they have to work within the set of response alternatives provided to them (Schuman and Kalton, 1985). Accordingly, they may only offer a 'don't know'-response if that response is explicitly offered as a legitimate answer. Note, however, that conversational norms do not account easily for the differential impact of different forms of filters because any filter should be sufficient to render no opinion responses legitimate. Thus, the differential impact of different filter wordings suggests that filters may have effects over and above the reduction of question constraints.

Regarding the differential impact of filters, Bishop et al. (1983) suggested that full filters 'encourage' don't know responses more strongly than quasi-filters, and the more so the more strongly they are worded. While this assumption describes the findings very well, it seems to us that a slightly different focus, that is in line with recent research on the informative functions of response alternatives (Schwarz and Hippler, 1987; Schwarz, in press), provides a better account for the underlying process.

Specifically, we want to suggest that full filters, in particular if they are

strongly worded, *discourage* substantive responses because they suggest to respondents that considerable knowledge is required to answer the question. For example, respondents who are asked, 'Have you thought enough about this issue to have an opinion on it?', may assume that this question is particularly important to the researcher and that they should only answer it when they have a well considered opinion based on sound knowledge of the facts. Moreover, respondents may assume that this filter question leads in to a series of detailed questions that require considerable knowledge about the issue. Both of these assumptions may prevent respondents from offering a substantive opinion even though they may have a general preference for one or the other side of the issue, which they would report in response to a global question with, for example, 'favor'/'oppose'/'no opinion' response alternatives.

If this analysis is correct, full filter questions—in particular if they are strongly worded—may screen out respondents on the basis of an inappropriate criterion: full filters may suggest to respondents that they face a much more demanding task than is actually the case. To this extent, full filters may result in a considerable underestimation of the proportion of respondents who hold an opinion at the level of specificity to which the question proper actually pertains—not to speak of opinions at the level of global reactions that individuals may act upon in everyday life.

Moreover, the discouraging effect of strongly worded filters may affect different respondents to different degrees. For example, respondents who hold a position with which they expect others to disagree, may be the more likely to avoid substantive responses the more the filter suggests that they are expected to answer a large number of difficult questions. Thus, the discouragement hypothesis allows some specific predictions about the nature of floaters. However, before we consider the methodological and substantive implications of the discouragement hypothesis, we will first report some evidence that bears on the impact of different filter forms on respondents' perception of task demands.

## EXPERIMENTS 1 AND 2: WHAT FILTERS MAY TELL THE RESPONDENTS

### METHOD

To explore the impact of different filter forms and wordings on respondents' perception of their task, we conducted an experimental survey with 320 college students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and a conceptual replication of this study with 104 students of business administration at the University of Mannheim, West Germany. As part of a larger self-administered questionnaire, respondents were exposed to a controversial statement, e.g. in the

US study: *The Russians are basically trying to get along with America.* For subjects assigned to the *Quasi-Filter Condition* this statement was followed by

*'Do you agree or disagree, or do you have no opinion on this?*

☐ *agree*

☐ *disagree*

☐ *have no opinion*

For subjects assigned to the *Weakly Worded Full Filter Condition* the filter read,

*'Do you have an opinion on this?*

☐ *no, have no opinion*

☐ *yes, have opinion*

whereas the *Strongly Worded Full Filter* read,

*'Have you thought enough about this issue to have an opinion on it?*

☐ *no, have no opinion*

☐ *yes, have opinion*

Subjects assigned to a *No Filter Control Condition* were only asked to consider the statement before proceeding to the subsequent questions.

Following these experimental manipulations, respondents' expectations about the number of follow-up questions asked, and their difficulty, were assessed, and respondents estimated how likely it is that they would have the knowledge required to answer these questions.

## RESULTS OF EXPERIMENT 1: US DATA

The first row of Table 1 shows respondents' expectations about the number of follow-up questions that the researcher is likely to ask. As predicted by the discouragement hypothesis, respondents' expectations about the number of follow-up questions they would have to answer increased with increasing strength of the filter ( $F(3, 312)=9.43, p<0.001$ , for the linear trend). Thus, respondents assigned to the No Filter Condition expected the smallest, and respondents assigned to the Strongly Worded Full Filter Condition, the largest number of follow-up questions.

Respondents' assumptions about the difficulty of these follow-up questions showed a similar increase ( $F(3, 312)=8.37, p<0.001$ , for the linear trend), as shown in the second row of Table 1. Accordingly, their estimate of the likelihood that they would have 'all the knowledge required for an adequate answer' decreased ( $F(3, 312)=5.49, p<0.001$ , for the linear trend).

TABLE 1 Respondents' Expectations about Follow-up Questions by Condition

	No Filter	Quasi Filter	Condition Weak Full Filter Mean Values	Strong Full Filter
Expected Number of Follow-up Questions <sup>1</sup>	1.9a	3.2b	4.8c	7.4d
Expected Difficulty of Follow-up Questions <sup>2</sup>	6.2a	7.3b	7.9b	9.8c
Expected Availability of Adequate Knowledge <sup>3</sup>	4.1a	3.8b	3.6b	2.2c <sup>4</sup>

n = 320

<sup>1</sup> Open ended question: number of expected questions<sup>2</sup> Scale: 1 = not at all difficult / 11 = very difficult<sup>3</sup> Scale: 1 = not at all likely / 11 = very likely that I have all the knowledge required for an adequate answer<sup>4</sup> Means not sharing the same subscript differ at least at  $p < 0.10$ , Duncan Test.

## RESULTS OF EXPERIMENT 2: GERMAN DATA

A conceptual replication of parts of this study in West Germany (Trometer, 1986), using a question on the treatment of terminally ill patients, replicated the basic findings. Again, respondents exposed to a strongly worded full filter expected a larger number of follow-up questions ( $M=6$ ) than respondents exposed to a weakly worded full filter ( $M=4$ ),  $F(1, 92)=5.0$ ,  $p < 0.03$ . Moreover, the former respondents assumed that these follow-up questions would be more difficult to answer ( $M=6.7$ , on a 10-point scale) than the latter ( $M=5.4$ ),  $F(1, 97)=9.4$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

## SUMMARY

In combination, these findings support the hypothesis that the use of filter questions may discourage respondents from giving substantive answers: the stronger the filter, the more respondents assume that they are facing a difficult task—and the less likely they are to provide a substantive response, as many previous studies have shown. Accordingly, the use of filter questions may result in an underestimation of the number of respondents who hold an opinion at the level of specificity that the question requires: respondents who may well hold an opinion may be unlikely to report doing so because they expect a more demanding task than they actually would have to face.

If this hypothesis is correct, respondents who give a 'don't know' response to a

filter question may well be able and willing to give a substantive response to a general opinion question, even if they reported that they do not have an opinion.

### EXPERIMENT 3: DISCOURAGEMENT AND THE NATURE OF FLOATING

#### METHOD

This possibility was explored in a third experiment, that followed a procedure previously used by Hippler and Hippler (1986) in a study on threatening questions. Specifically, respondents were asked the actual opinion question independently of whether they previously reported, in response to a full filter question, that they have an opinion or not. A random sample, drawn from telephone directories, of 336 adults (age 18 or older) living in Mannheim, West Germany, participated in a telephone survey on cable TV, conducted in the fall of 1986. As Question 34, respondents were read the statement, *It has recently been suggested that horror videos may put teenagers at a risk. Some people believe that these videos are harmful to teenagers, others think this is not the case.* Directly following this statement, respondents assigned to the *Standard Form Condition* were asked if they found the effect of horror videos on teenagers to be 'very harmful, harmful, somewhat harmful, or not at all harmful?'. A 'don't know' option was not offered, but accepted if volunteered. Respondents assigned to the *Weakly Worded Full Filter Condition* were asked if they 'have an opinion on the issue', while respondents assigned to the *Strongly Worded Full Filter Condition* were asked if they had 'thought much about this issue?'

Following the filter questions, all respondents assigned to the full filter conditions—independently of whether they reported having an opinion or not—were asked how harmful they believed horror videos to be for teenagers:

*Generally speaking, do you think that the influence of horror videos on teenagers is*

- ( ) *very harmful*
- ( ) *harmful*
- ( ) *somewhat harmful*
- ( ) *not at all harmful?*

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As in previous studies, more respondents reported having no opinion in response to the strong (25 per cent) than in response to the weak (7 per cent) filter question, or in response to its standard form (3 per cent), chi-square (1)=12.1,  $p < 0.01$ . However, *all* respondents who had reported *not* having an opinion when presented one of the filter questions, subsequently provided a substantive

response to the general opinion question. That is, all don't know (DK) respondents eventually 'floated'.

This finding is compatible with different theoretical accounts of the floating phenomenon, each of which has different implications for the key issue: how meaningful are the responses provided by floaters? On the one hand, the present finding is in line with the discouragement hypothesis. According to this account, respondents who hold a global opinion may nevertheless say 'don't know' because the filter suggests that they will have to answer a number of detailed follow-up questions, and respondents may doubt that they have sufficient knowledge to live up to that task. Would they know that only one global judgment is expected, they would be happy to offer it—and this is what they do when a global question is asked. Accordingly, their substantive responses are perfectly meaningful at the low level of specificity that the global question requires.

On the other hand, it has been assumed that floaters may provide random responses—often referred to as a mental flip of a coin—in response to unfiltered questions. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that floaters do not hold an opinion on the issue but only dare to admit so if a 'don't know' option is explicitly offered. Accordingly, floaters may also have given 'random' responses to the global opinion question that followed the filter. Finally, it has also been suggested (e.g. Bishop *et al.*, 1983; Schuman and Kalton, 1985) that floaters are highly uncertain about their opinion, and—if pushed to provide an answer—may therefore adopt the majority position to be on the safe side. Accordingly, their responses would not reflect their opinion but rather a strategic self-presentation.

To evaluate these issues, we need to explore the relationship of the substantive responses provided by floaters to other variables. In previous research, this has not been possible because respondents who said 'don't know' were not subsequently asked for their opinion. The approach used in the present study, however, does in principle allow this exploration because floaters' substantive responses are assessed. Unfortunately, the limited sample size of the present study limits our possibilities to conduct the required analyses. However, a comparison of the substantive responses provided by floaters and non-floaters reveals an interesting finding: specifically, more than half (56 per cent) of the respondents who reported having an opinion on the filter question assume that horror videos are very harmful to teenagers, as shown in Table 2.

In contrast, only 29 per cent of the floaters hold this position. Similarly, only 9 per cent of the non-floaters assume that horror videos may be only 'somewhat harmful', while a third of the floaters (31 per cent) holds this opinion. Thus, a considerable proportion of the floaters endorsed what is a minority position in the sample. This finding is well in line with the discouragement hypothesis suggested by the results of Experiments 1 and 2. If the use of filter questions elicits

TABLE 2 Substantive responses of floaters and non-floaters regarding the harmfulness of horror videos

<i>Harmfulness</i>	<i>Floaters</i> (n = 35)	<i>Non-Floaters</i> (n = 291)
	per cent	
Very harmful	29	56
Harmful	37	34
Somewhat harmful	31	9
Not at all harmful	3	1
Total:	100	100

$$\chi^2(3) = 18.8, p < 0.01.$$

expectations of a difficult task, respondents who hold a minority position may be particularly motivated to avoid a series of detailed questions bearing on it. Note, however, that this argument assumes that respondents were aware of their minority status. While research on the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1980) suggests that respondents have a reasonably accurate perception of the distribution of opinions in the population, and may thus be aware of their minority or majority status, a more direct test of the hypothesis is called for.

#### EXPERIMENT 4: PERCEIVED MAJORITY AND THE LIKELIHOOD OF FLOATING

##### METHOD

To provide this test, respondents' perception of the opinion held by the majority of the population was assessed in a follow-up study. According to the above hypothesis, it was assumed that respondents who perceive their own position as the minority position are more likely to float than respondents who assume that their position is shared by the majority of the population. As part of a larger survey about the noise impact of heavily used freeways, conducted in the fall of 1987, a random sample of 165 adults (age 18 years or older) living in the Heidelberg, West Germany, area reported their own opinion, as well as their perception of the majority opinion, on the use of leaded gas (a current issue in West Germany).

All respondents were exposed to a filter question that read: *It is currently discussed that leaded regular gas should no longer be supplied. There are different opinions about this issue. Some people are in favor, others are opposed to the issue. Do you have an opinion on that?* Following this filter question, all respondents were asked how strongly they favor or oppose the supply of leaded regular gas



TABLE 3 Substantive responses and perceived majority position regarding the supply of leaded gas

	<i>Floaters</i> (No Opinion)	<i>Non-Floaters</i> (Opinion)
	<i>Mean values</i>	
Own Opinion	4.5	5.9
Perceived Population Position	4.4	4.9

Note. Scale: 1 = opposed to/7 = in favor of supply of leaded regular gas.

(1 = oppose, 7 = favor). Either before or after this question sequence, respondents were asked to report which position the majority of the population would endorse on the same rating scale.

## RESULTS

As in Experiment 3, all respondents who reported that they do not have an opinion (10 per cent) in response to the filter question did provide an opinion on the issue in response to the subsequent substantive question. As in the previous experiment, their opinion differs significantly from the opinion of respondents who initially reported holding an opinion about the issue. As shown in Table 3, floaters were more opposed to the supply of leaded gas than non-floaters,  $F(3, 157) = 10.3, p < 0.01$ .

However, contrary to expectations, both groups did not differ in their estimates of the majority position,  $F(3, 157) = 1.6, n.s.$  Moreover, a comparison of respondents' own position with their perceptions of the majority position indicates that the floaters perceived a high degree of similarity between their own position ( $M = 4.4$ ) and the assumed majority position ( $M = 4.5$ ). In contrast, non-floaters, that is, respondents who had reported holding an opinion in response to the filter question, assumed that their own position ( $M = 5.9$ ) differs from the majority ( $M = 4.9$ ). These findings obviously contradict the previously entertained minority hypothesis, and are more compatible with the rival hypothesis that floaters may endorse what they perceive to be the majority position if pressed to provide a substantive response.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the present paper, we addressed two related issues. We explored what respondents learn from various forms of filter questions, and we attempted to gain insight into the nature of floating. Regarding the first issue, our findings indicate

consistently that filter questions influence respondents' expectations about their task. Respondents who are exposed to a filter question expect more, and more difficult, follow-up questions, and doubt that they have sufficient knowledge to answer them. Moreover, this effect is the more pronounced the more strongly worded the filter is. Accordingly, the present findings suggest that it may be fruitful to reconsider the use of filter questions. While recent research on the use of filter questions focussed on, 'How do we allow respondents to tell us that they do *not* have an opinion?', we also need to consider the complimentary issue: 'How do we assure that respondents *can* report an opinion about which they may not feel totally at ease?' So far, it seems that using a quasi-filter, that is, offering a 'don't know' option as part of the response alternatives, may be the choice that satisfies both needs.

With regard to the nature of floating, our results do not allow substantive conclusions. While Experiments 3 and 4 demonstrated that the responses provided by floaters differ from the responses provided by non-floaters, the obtained findings are compatible with a number of different hypotheses. More importantly, however, these experiments illustrate the feasibility of a procedure that avoids one of the major methodological limitations in research on floating. Usually, inferences about the opinion of floaters are based on comparisons of the responses provided to a filtered and a non-filtered form of the same question in a between subjects design. This approach renders it impossible to identify floaters and to analyze their behavior at the individual level. In contrast, using a within subjects design, we attempted to assess respondents' opinions independently of whether they reported having or not having an opinion in response to the filter question—and found that all respondents offered a substantive answer, presumably because the substantive question asked was less demanding than what they expected when answering the filter question. While the use of a within subjects design is not without its own problems, it provides the previously missing opportunity to analyze floating at the individual level, and is therefore likely to contribute to the power of future research in this area.

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Hans-J. Hippler is Project Director at the Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen, ZUMA, in Mannheim. He published numerous papers on survey methodology and recently co-edited a book on *Social information processing and survey methodology* (New York, Springer Verlag, 1987) with N. Schwarz and S. Sudman.

Norbert Schwarz is Program Director at the Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen, ZUMA, in Mannheim and 'Privatdozent' of psychology at the University of Heidelberg. He published numerous papers on human judgmental processes and recently co-edited a book on *Social information processing and survey methodology* (New York, Springer Verlag, 1987) with H.-J. Hippler and S. Sudman.

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