

Subsequent questions may influence answers to preceding questions in mail surveys

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Arbeitspapier / working paper

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Schwarz, N., & Hippler, H.-J. (1994). *Subsequent questions may influence answers to preceding questions in mail surveys*. (ZUMA-Arbeitsbericht, 1994/07). Mannheim: Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen -ZUMA-. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-70161>

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ZUMA-Arbeitsbericht 94/07

**Subsequent Questions May Influence Answers to Preceding
Questions in Mail Surveys**

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August 1994

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Subsequent Questions May Influence Answers to Preceding Questions in Mail Surveys

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08/94

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Abstract

Data of a mode experiment demonstrate that the emergence of context effects may be independent of question order under mail survey conditions. Under telephone interview conditions, substantively related questions affected responses to the target question only when asked first. However, the same questions affected responses under mail survey conditions independent of whether they preceded or followed the target question.

Subsequent Questions May Influence Answers to Preceding Questions in Mail Surveys

One of the key differences between modes of data collection pertains to the temporal order in which the material is presented (see Schwarz, Strack, Hippler, & Bishop, 1991). Telephone and face-to-face interviews have a strict sequential organization and respondents have to process the information in the temporal succession in which it is presented by the interviewer. As a result, preceding questions may influence answers given to subsequent questions, whereas subsequent questions cannot influence the answers already provided to preceding questions. In contrast, self-administered questionnaires do not have a strict sequential ordering. Although the questions are presented in a predetermined order, respondents may read ahead, go back and forth between related questions, or may change previous answers. Accordingly, a self-administered questionnaire format may attenuate the impact of question order. This, however, does not imply that the content of related questions may not affect the answers given. Rather, it suggests that the emergence of context effects may be independent of question order in a self-administered format, allowing for influences of preceding as well as following questions.

In line with this hypothesis, Bishop, Hippler, Schwarz, and Strack (1988) observed that the operation of the norm of even-handedness depended on question order under telephone, but not under self-administered conditions. Replicating Schuman and Ludwig's (1983) Japanese trade items with a German sample, they found that respondents were significantly more likely to favor limiting Japanese imports to Germany than they were to favor limiting German exports to Japan, when each question was asked in the first position under telephone interview conditions. Moreover, support for limitations on German exports to Japan increased when this question was preceded by a question about restricting Japanese imports to Germany, which presumably evoked the norm of even-handedness. Thus, the data under telephone interview conditions replicated Schuman and Ludwig's findings based on a U.S. sample. But when respondents were asked these same questions under self-administered conditions, the order in which they were presented had no significant effect on the results. Rather, these respondents reported considerable support for limiting German exports to Japan under both order conditions, suggesting that the norm of even-handedness was evoked independent of question order. Data from a U.S. sample followed the same pattern, although

the differences did not reach significance (see Bishop et al., 1988).

These findings suggest that respondents either read ahead or returned to the previous question once they encountered the subsequent one. The latter may be particularly likely when the subsequent question draws attention to strongly held norms that have clear implications for a preceding question, as is the case for the Japanese trade items. If order-independent context effects would be observed in mail surveys under other conditions is an open issue. To address this issue, we assessed the emergence of question order effects under telephone and mail survey conditions in a mode experiment, using questions that do not evoke the norm of even-handedness.

Method

The reported data are drawn from a larger experimental survey conducted with a systematic random sample of 412 adults (18 years or older), selected from the telephone directories for Mannheim and Heidelberg, Germany, in November and December 1991. 613 respondents were initially contacted on the phone and asked whether they were willing to participate in a short survey; 466 (76%) agreed with this request and were randomly assigned to conditions. Of the 238 assigned to telephone interview conditions, 229 (96.2%) completed the interview during the same phone call. The 228 respondents assigned to mail survey conditions were informed that a questionnaire would be mailed to them. The mail survey followed the Total-Design-Method (Dillman, 1978) and 183 (80.2%) completed questionnaires were received. Thus, the initial telephone screening procedure allowed us to limit differential self-selection under different modes.

The crucial question asked respondents how much money they would be willing to donate to support the suffering citizens of Russia, an issue that received considerable media attention in the winter of 1991. This question was either immediately preceded or immediately followed by two questions about taxes (see Appendix for question wordings). The first asked whether respondents preferred a reduction in income tax or increased welfare spending, whereas the second question assessed their support for tax raises that were implemented during the preceding months.

Results and Discussion

As expected, the tax and welfare questions affected respondents' reported willingness to

donate to Russia. However, the pattern depended on the mode of data collection. Respondents who were interviewed on the telephone reported an intended donation of 45.22 deutschmarks when the Russia question was asked first, but of only 28.97 deutschmarks when the Russia question was preceded by the context questions, $F(1,394) = 4.22, p < .04$, for the simple main effect. Thus, drawing attention to tax raises and welfare spending in Germany decreased respondents' willingness to donate to Russia.

Respondents under mail conditions, on the other hand, were not significantly influenced by the order in which the question were asked, $F < 1$, for the simple main effect. Rather, they reported low intended donations when the tax questions preceded ($M = 25.66$ deutschmarks) as well as followed ($M = 21.05$ deutschmarks) the Russia question. Moreover, their intended donations under either order did not differ significantly from the low donations offered under telephone interview conditions when the context questions were asked first, both $F < 1$. In combination, this pattern resulted in a marginally significant interaction of mode and question order $F(1,394) = 3.11, p < .08$, as well as a main effect of mode, $F(1,394) = 5.07, p < .03$. The latter, however, is solely due to the high intended donations reported under telephone interview conditions when the Russia question was asked first.

In summary, the present findings indicate that responses to the donation question were influenced by the context questions even under conditions where the context questions followed the donation question in the mail survey questionnaire. In combination with our previous findings (see Bishop et al., 1988; Schwarz et al., 1991), this illustrates that it is important to differentiate between question order and question context effects. Whereas the sequential nature of telephone and face-to-face interviews guarantees that responses can only be influenced by preceding questions, self-administered surveys allow for an influence of subsequent questions as well. As a result, we obtained no effect of sheer question order under mail survey conditions, but a pronounced effect of question context, independent of the order in which the questions were presented in the mail questionnaire. Hence, finding no order effects under self-administered conditions does not necessarily imply that substantively related questions did not affect the results.

Whereas we know little about the conditions under which respondents are likely to read ahead, or to return to previously answered questions, the present findings indicate that this possibility is not restricted to questions that evoke the operation of strong norms.

Rather, such effects may presumably be obtained whenever one would expect an order effect under interview conditions.

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Translated Question Wordings

Donation Question

Suppose that there is another request for donations for the suffering population of Russia this winter. How much would you be willing to donate for this purpose?

_____ DM

☐ Would not donate

Context Questions

Next year, the value added tax will be raised from the current 14 percent to 15 percent. Do you approve or disapprove of this tax hike?

☐ approve

☐ disapprove

If the federal government had to decide between increased welfare spending or a tax cut, what would you prefer the federal government to do: To increase welfare spending or to decrease taxes?

☐ Increase welfare spending

☐ Decrease taxes

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