

## The range of response alternatives may determine the meaning of the question

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# THE RANGE OF RESPONSE ALTERNATIVES MAY DETERMINE THE MEANING OF THE QUESTION: FURTHER EVIDENCE ON INFORMATIVE FUNCTIONS OF RESPONSE ALTERNATIVES

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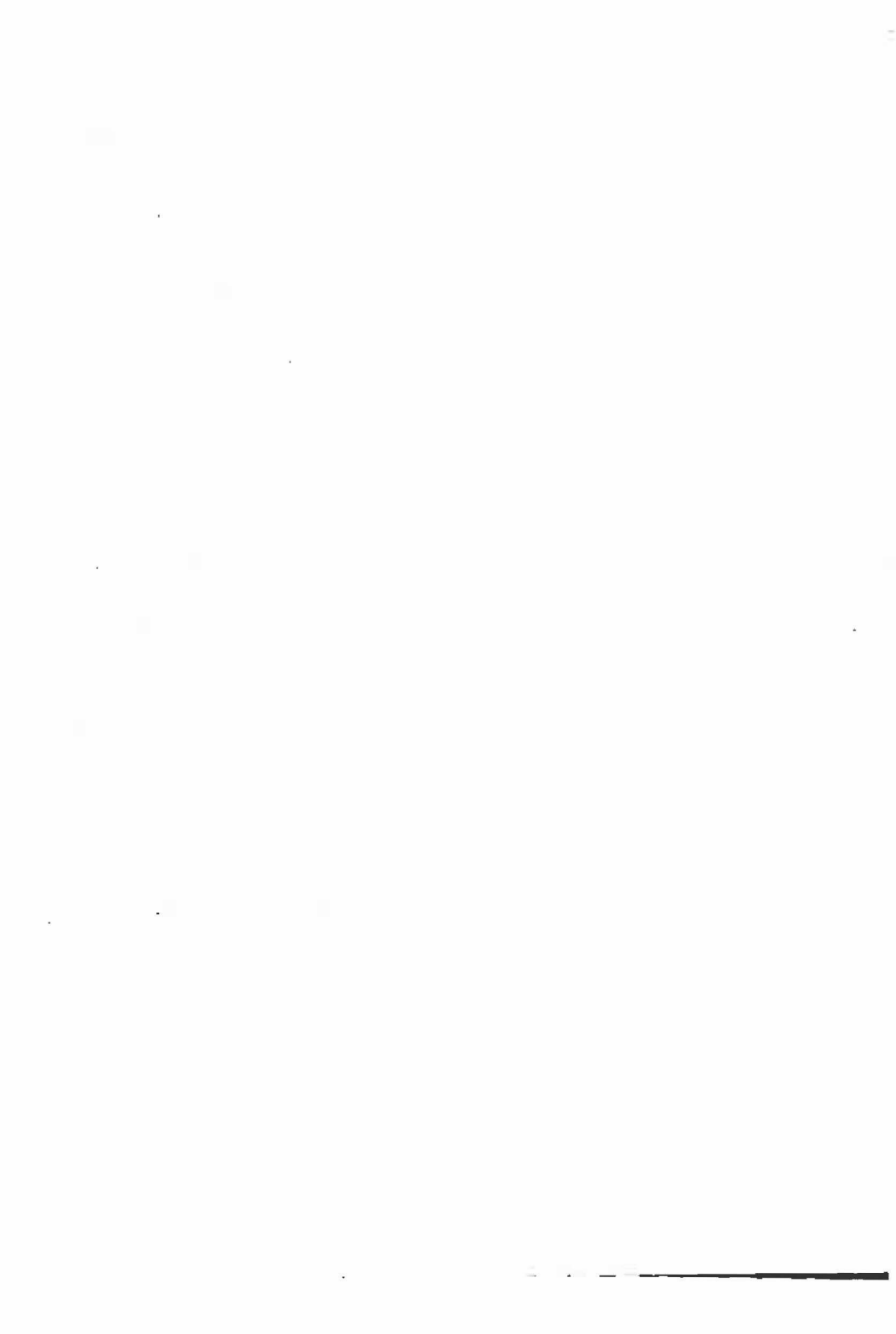
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Respondents' definition of a target behavior was found to be affected by the frequency range of those response alternatives that assessed the respondents' behavior. Respondents had to report how often they felt "really annoyed." Response scales ranged either from "less than once a year" to "more than once every 3 months," or from "less than twice a week" to "several times a day." Respondents who used the first scale subsequently reported more extreme examples of annoying situations than respondents who used the second one. This suggests that the range of the response alternatives induced respondents to consider different behavioral instances to be the target of the question. Moreover, the different behavioral instances activated by the response scales influenced subjects' interpretation of a related situation, even when an explicit report of an example was not required.

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The administration of questionnaires in survey research, laboratory experiments, and psychological testing has often been viewed as a process of interpersonal communication. However, researchers have primarily paid attention to the communicative aspects of the behavior of the participants (cf. Hyman, 1954; Sudman & Bradburn, 1974). The communicative function of the questionnaire itself, on the other hand, has rarely been considered. It is obvious, of course, that the respondent communicates information to the researcher through his or her answers to the questions that are asked. What is less obvious is that the researcher, through the nature of the questions asked and of the response alternatives provided, also communicates information to the respondent about his or her assumptions about the issue under consideration. While this has been recognized for question wordings that are considered one-sided and loaded (cf. Schuman & Presser, 1981, for a review), the basic phenomenon is more general.

Suppose, for example, that a researcher wants to assess the frequency with which respondents engage in a certain behavior. Typically, respondents are asked to check the appropriate alternative from a set of response categories provided to them, and the selected alternatives are assumed to inform the researcher about the respondents' behavior. However, the set of response alternatives that is presented to them may also be informative for the respondents. Most importantly, respondents may assume that the range of response alternatives reflects the researcher's assumptions about the distribution of the behavior in the population. If so, respondents may infer from the range of response alternatives which behavior is typical and/or socially desirable. These inferences, in turn, may affect respondents' own behavioral reports, as well as related judgments.

Recent research by Schwarz, Hippler, Deutsch, and Strack (1985) provides evidence for this possibility. Specifically, respondents were asked to report their daily TV consumption on a scale ranging from "up to 2½ hours per day" to "more than 4½ hours per day" or on a scale ranging from "up to ½ hour per day" to "more than 2½ hours per day." As expected, respondents who were given the first scale reported a higher TV consumption than respondents who were given the second scale. In addition, the former respondents also estimated the average TV consumption of a typical citizen to be higher. Thus, respondents seemed to use the range of the response alternatives as a frame of reference in estimating their own behavioral frequency and in determining the behavior that is typical in the population.

Moreover, the range of the response scales affected the standard of comparison that respondents used in subsequent judgments. For

example, respondents whose own frequency estimate was *below* the midpoint of the scale given to them (suggesting that they watched less TV than the average person) reported higher satisfaction with the variety of their leisure-time activities than respondents whose frequency report was *above* the midpoint. In summary, this research demonstrated that response alternatives may be informative not only for the researcher, but also for respondents. Most importantly, respondents extract information about the underlying distribution from the response scale—however incorrectly—and use this information in their behavioral reports and subsequent judgments.

The present research has extended these findings by exploring the role of response alternatives in another facet of the communication process: the respondent's interpretation of the question. In the study described above (Schwarz *et al.*, 1985), the question referred to a concrete and unambiguous behavior (i.e., watching TV). Frequently, however, respondents are asked to report subjective experiences that are somewhat ambiguous and subject to interpretation. Under these conditions, an additional consideration arises—namely, the effect of the range of response alternatives provided on the interpretation of the attribute or behavior that respondents are asked to judge.

Assume, for example, that respondents are asked to indicate how frequently they are "irritated." Before the respondent can give an answer, he or she must decide what the researcher means by "irritated." Does this refer to major irritations, such as fights with one's spouse, or does it refer to minor irritations, such as having to wait for service in a restaurant? If the respondent has no opportunity to ask the interviewer, he or she may pick up some pertinent information from the questionnaire. If it is assumed that major irritations occur less frequently than minor irritations, one pertinent cue may be the frequency range provided by the scale. Suppose, for example, that respondents are asked to report how often they are irritated on a scale from "several times daily" to "less than once a week." These subjects may consider less severely irritating behaviors to be the target of the question than respondents who are given a scale ranging from "several times a year" to "less than once every 3 months." If so, the frequency range of the response alternatives, rather than the wording of the question *per se*, would determine the type of annoying experiences that respondents are likely to report. That is, respondents' interpretation of the content of the question is likely to be a function of the range of the response alternatives provided to them.

In addition to affecting the interpretation of the question, different response scales may also result in different responses to related ques-



tions, including questions that pertain to the evaluation of other experiences and questions that involve social comparisons. Each of these possibilities is considered in turn.

Regarding the evaluation of specific annoyance experiences, the exact effects of having reported one's own experiences on a high- or low-frequency response scale are different to predict a priori. In general, the low-frequency scale is assumed to bring more extremely annoying experiences to mind than the high-frequency scale, as discussed above. However, this may result either in contrast or in assimilation effects on the evaluation of a specific instance. On the one hand, a number of judgmental theories predict contrast effects, which may either be due to a change in the standard of comparison used (e.g., Helson, 1964) or to a change in respondents' perspective (e.g., Ostrom & Upshaw, 1968; Parducci, 1965, 1984; Upshaw & Ostrom, 1984). Each of these theories predicts, on different grounds, that respondents should evaluate a given instance as *less* irritating when the response scale they have used previously has directed their attention toward major rather than minor irritations.

On the other hand, thinking about concrete annoyance experiences may also activate concepts that may subsequently affect respondents' interpretation of the situation to be evaluated. This is suggested by a large body of literature pertaining to priming effects (see Higgins & King, 1981, and Wyer & Srull, 1986, for reviews). Specifically, if several concepts are potentially applicable to the interpretation of a stimulus, individuals are likely to use the one that comes to mind most easily.

This usually results in an assimilation of the target to the primed concept, unless the two are presented as clearly distinct (Martin, 1985). Thus, respondents may evaluate a situation as *more* irritating when the response scale directs their attention toward major irritations, particularly if the situation is somewhat ambiguous. In addition, recalling annoying experiences may put subjects into a bad mood, particularly if the experiences are extreme and the recall is vivid and detailed. Bad mood, however, may result in more negative evaluations, and the impact of mood may override cognitive contrast effects (Strack, Schwarz, & Gschneidinger, 1985; see Schwarz & Clore, in press, for a detailed discussion). Each of these processes may therefore result in evaluations of a given instance as *more* annoying when the use of a low-frequency response scale has brought more annoying experiences to mind.

In the present study, these possibilities were explored in a 3 × 2 factorial design. Respondents had to report how frequently they felt "really annoyed," using either an open-answer format (no response

alternatives provided) or one of two sets of response alternatives. The first set ranged from "several times a day" to "less than twice a week," and the second set ranged from "more than once every 3 months" to "less than once a year." While the second set provided considerably lower frequencies than pretest subjects reported in an open-answer format, the first set was roughly equivalent to these reports, thus providing the opportunity to explore the potential impact of checking a precoded alternative on a response scale rather than responding in an open-answer format.

Following these behavioral reports, half of the respondents described a typical example of an annoying situation they had experienced. The remaining respondents evaluated how annoying they would find a potentially annoying situation that was described to them. Finally, respondents rated how frequently they felt annoyed compared to others.

It was expected that the low-frequency response scale would direct respondents' attention to more severe instances of irritation than would the high-frequency response scale. As a consequence, the reported examples would be similar to the salient instances. That is, respondents in the low-frequency conditions were expected to provide more severe examples of irritation than respondents in the high-frequency conditions. Such a difference would demonstrate that the response scale influenced the interpretation of what was meant by "annoying." Moreover, given that severe instances of irritation occur less frequently and are more involving than minor instances of irritation, we expected that the more severe instances would also be reported in a more concrete and vivid style than the less severe instances.

When respondents were asked to evaluate a situation described to them rather than to report an example of their own, the range of the response scale might affect their evaluation in either of two ways. On the one hand, they might use the instances of irritation that came to mind when reporting their behavior as a standard of comparison. In this case, they would evaluate the situation as less severe when the low-frequency scale induced them to think of major irritations than when the high-frequency scale induced them to think of minor irritations. However, if the low-frequency scale induced respondents to think about extremely annoying experiences, this might also activate concepts relevant to extremely annoying situations, which might subsequently be used to interpret the standard example provided. In addition, thinking about extreme annoyance experiences in a vivid and concrete manner might elicit negative affect. Either of these latter

processes might override potential contrast effects. If so, respondents who used the low-frequency scale might evaluate the situation as more annoying than respondents who used the high-frequency scale.

## METHOD

A total of 85 subjects were recruited in the cafeteria of a West German university. Subjects were asked to participate in a survey of students' everyday experiences and were given a short questionnaire that was presumably part of a series of different questionnaires covering a wide range of issues. Embedded in demographic filler items was a question that asked how often subjects typically encountered situations in which they felt "really annoyed." Subjects assigned to the low-frequency condition were provided a set of four response alternatives ranging from "less than once a year" to "more than once every 3 months." For subjects in the high-frequency condition, the response alternatives ranged from "less than twice a week" to "several times a day." Subjects assigned to the control condition answered the question in an open-answer format.

On the next page of the questionnaire, subjects were either asked to report a *typical example* of the annoying experiences they had had (example-generation condition), or were asked to evaluate how annoying they would find the following situation (example-evaluation condition): "A salesperson in a department store gives you an insolent answer, though you asked a polite question." Subjects indicated how much this experience would annoy them on a scale from "not at all annoying" (1) to "extremely annoying" (11).

Finally, all subjects were asked to provide a comparative report of how frequently they felt really annoyed along a scale from 1 ("much less often than others") to 11 ("much more often than others").

Subjects' examples in the example-generation condition were evaluated by two independent judges, who rated the annoyingness of the example (1 = "not at all annoying," 11 = "extremely annoying") on a first reading, and the concreteness of its description (1 = "not at all concrete," 11 = "extremely concrete") on a later second reading. Interrater agreement was high ( $r = .87$  for ratings of annoyingness and  $r = .92$  for ratings of concreteness).

## RESULTS

## BEHAVIORAL REPORTS

An analysis of the behavioral reports provided by subjects who responded in an open-answer format indicated that the vast majority (11 out of 15 subjects) reported behavioral frequencies in the range of the high-frequency response alternatives. This finding parallels pretest data ( $n = 22$ ) with a modal report of three to four annoying experiences per week, and indicates that the high-frequency response alternatives covered the range of subjects' spontaneous reports. In contrast, the low-frequency response alternatives fell outside the range of the subjects' spontaneous reports. One may, therefore, assume that subjects who were given the low-frequency scale found it difficult to report their behavior on this scale. This difficulty may have induced them to reconsider the meaning of the question, resulting in the hypothesized effects. Subjects who were given the high-frequency scale, on the other hand, should not have encountered this difficulty, and their subsequent responses therefore should not differ from those of subjects who responded in an open-answer format.

## EXAMPLES PROVIDED BY SUBJECTS

The first row of Table 1 shows the annoyance ratings of the examples subjects provided. Inspection of the means indicates that the respon-

TABLE 1  
Reported Examples, Evaluation of Standard Example, and Comparative Judgments  
as a Function of Response Formats

	OPEN-ANSWER FORMAT	RESPONSE ALTERNATIVES	
		HIGH-FREQUENCY	LOW-FREQUENCY
Examples generated by subjects			
Annoyingness	3.5	3.6	4.4
Concreteness	3.3	2.7	4.1
Evaluation of standard example			
Annoyingness	3.9	4.1	5.5
Comparative judgment	4.4	4.1	5.1

Note.  $n$ 's = 13-15 per cell. Higher values indicate higher annoyingness or concreteness, and higher estimates of frequency of annoyingness relative to others. Possible range of values is 1-11.

dents in the open-answer and high-frequency conditions did not differ with respect to the rated annoyingness of their examples ( $M$ 's = 3.6 and 3.5, respectively),  $t < 1$ . Subjects who responded to the low-frequency response alternatives, however, reported examples that were rated as reliably more annoying ( $M = 4.4$ ) than the examples reported in the two other conditions,  $t(40) = 2.01$ ,  $p = .05$ . In summary, the use of precoded response alternatives rather than an open-answer format affected subjects' examples only when the range of the response alternatives deviated from the range of subjects' spontaneous reports. Presumably, subjects who were given the low-frequency scale found it difficult to report their behavior within the constraints of the scale, and this difficulty induced them to reconsider the meaning of the question, resulting in a redefinition of the target behaviors.

The ratings of the concreteness of subjects' examples, shown in the second row of Table 1, parallel the results of the annoyingness ratings. The examples provided by subjects who responded to the high-frequency scale were nonsignificantly less concrete ( $M = 2.7$ ) than the examples provided by subjects who responded in an open-answer format ( $M = 3.3$ ),  $t(40) = 1.55$ ,  $p > .10$ . In contrast, subjects who were given the low-frequency scale reported more concrete examples ( $M = 4.1$ ) than both other groups,  $t(40) = 2.68$ ,  $p < .02$ .

Correlational analyses indicated that the more annoying examples were also rated as more concrete than the less annoying ones,  $r(43) = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ . This suggests that the more annoying experiences were represented in memory in more detail, resulting in more concrete descriptions.

## EVALUATION OF STANDARD EXAMPLE

The third row of Table 1 shows subjects' evaluations of the standard example. Subjects who were presented with the high-frequency response alternatives and subjects who responded in an open-answer format evaluated the example as similarly annoying ( $M$ 's = 4.1 and 3.9, respectively),  $t < 1$ . Respondents who were given the low-frequency scale, on the other hand, evaluated the example as more annoying ( $M = 5.5$ ) than did the two other groups,  $t(40) = 2.27$ ,  $p < .03$ .

## COMPARATIVE JUDGMENTS

As a final judgment, subjects in all conditions estimated whether they themselves were more often or less often annoyed than others. Note

that this judgment was a comparison of the *frequency* of one's own annoyance to that of others, rather than an evaluation of the severity of annoying experiences. As in the earlier studies (Schwarz *et al.*, 1985), subjects seemed to use the midpoint of the scale given to them as a standard of comparison. Specifically, subjects who were presented with the low-frequency scale—and who, without exception, reported frequencies in the upper range of *that* scale—estimated themselves to be more frequently annoyed relative to others ( $M = 5.1$ ) than did subjects who were presented with the high-frequency scale ( $M = 4.1$ ),  $t(40) = 1.98$ ,  $p < .06$ . The comparative judgments of respondents in the open-answer condition ( $M = 4.4$ ) fell in between. This pattern of results suggests that respondents considered their own location in the distribution suggested by the scale, in addition to the behavioral instances they thought of, in estimating their relative frequency of annoyance.

## DISCUSSION

The present research extends the previous findings concerning informative functions of response scales (Schwarz *et al.*, 1985). The results of this study indicate that the range of response alternatives helps respondents to determine the specific referent of a question. In the present study, subjects' own examples reflected the experiences they considered to be the target of the question. Thus, subjects in the low-frequency condition reported more extreme examples than subjects in the high-frequency condition or subjects who responded in an open-answer format.

Moreover, subjects presented with the low-frequency alternatives evaluated a standard example provided in the questionnaire as more annoying. This effect was presumably due to the different behavioral instances the response scales brought to mind. That is, in order to answer the frequency question, subjects who were presented with the low-frequency alternatives may have reviewed more extreme examples of annoying experiences than the remaining subjects. This would parallel the findings in the example-generation condition. Given that vividly recalling experiences of extreme hedonic value is likely to affect subjects' mood (Strack *et al.*, 1985), one may hypothesize that subjects' evaluation of the standard situation was influenced by their affective state at the time of judgment (cf. Gallagher & Clore, 1985; Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Alternatively, subjects may have assimilated the described situation to the experiences they recalled, because of the priming of differentially extreme annoyance concepts

(cf. Higgins & King, 1981). These possibilities are not mutually exclusive and deserve further investigation.

In summary, the present findings, in combination with the results reported by Schwarz *et al.* (1985), demonstrate that response alternatives serve a variety of informative functions. Subjects may use the response alternatives to determine the intended target of the question. As a consequence, they may consider different behavioral instances. Moreover, they may use the frequency range suggested by the response alternatives to estimate the frequency of their own behavior, and to determine which behavior is "usual." These processes not only may result in different behavioral reports, but may also affect comparative judgments and the interpretation of related issues. In summary, these findings highlight that both the question *and* the provided response alternatives must be considered. Changes in the response alternatives undermine not only the comparability of behavioral reports, but also the comparability of subsequent related judgments.

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