

Video 5 of 6: Respondent (Sensitive Questions)

Questionnaire Design



THE WORLD BANK

MANNHEIM
BUSINESS SCHOOL

Asking Sensitive Questions

- Can the information be used in a legal way?
- Is the information personal?
- Does the information relate to the image of the respondent?

Data quality of sensitive items

- “Normal” response error.
 - can occur at each stage of the response process (comprehension, retrieval, formulation, reporting).
 - Function of survey design and topic.
- Error specific to sensitivity of item
 - Special issues related to storage, retrieval and reporting of sensitive behavior.
 - Deliberately misreport
 - Stored erroneously and reported as such.

Sensitive behaviors: social desirability

- Overall desire to avoid stigmatization
- What is desirable?
 - Acceptable behavior
 - Desirable behavior
 - Need for social approval
- Concept of threat
 - Potential judgments

	Male	Female
Past year	4.52	1.72
Past 5 years	14.72	3.87
Lifetime	22.76	6.51

Average Number of Sexual Partners. Source: Tourangeau, R., Rusbult, K., Jobe, J., Smith, T.W. and W.F. Pratt (1997). "Sources of Error in a Survey on Sexual Behavior." *Journal of Official Statistics*. 12:341-365.

Different levels of sensitivity

- Question is threatening to ask, regardless of respondent's answer.
 - E.g., Income
 - Respondents will refuse to answer
- Question is threatening to answer.
 - E.g., Drug use, domestic violence (when others can hear)
 - Respondent may give the wrong answer.
 - Depends on what the actual behavior is.

Asking sensitive questions on the phone

You can't control the environment the respondent is in, in a phone survey. They can be overheard, answering the questions can make them upset etc.

Examples stress, mental health, sex, domestic violence, etc.

- Avoid questions that need a lot of follow-up questions or explanations (probing).
- Check if people are around the respondent. If so, re-schedule.

Asking sensitive questions: Context matters

- Response format is important
- Set the context of the question
 - Embed question within related set of questions.
 - Best to embed question to communicate behavior is acceptable.

Setting context with prior questions

- Permissive context for undesirable behavior.
- Restrictive context for desirable behavior.

Example:

- Q1. In general, would you say that you drink more than your friends, less than your friends, or about the same amount as your friends.
- Q2. Think about the friend you know who drinks the most. About how many drinks would you say that person usually has?
- Q3. And how about you? On days when you have any alcoholic beverages, about how many drinks do you have?

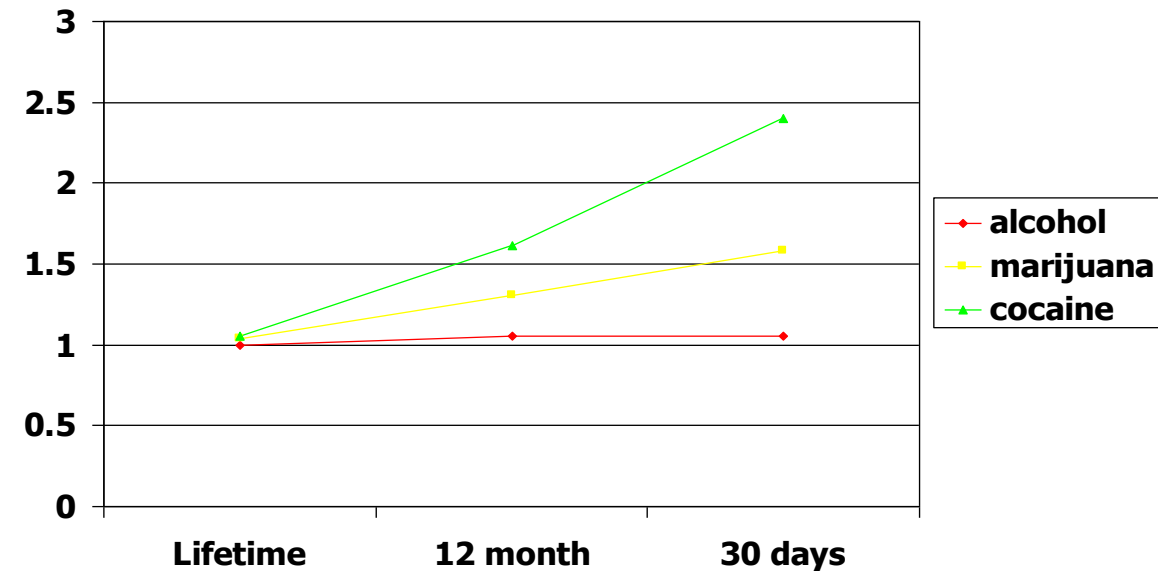
Sudman and Bradburn, 1982

Deliberate Loading

- Deliberate loading of question
 - Can be used to both reduce over reporting of desirable behavior (voting) and underreporting of undesirable behavior
- “Everybody does it”
 - Even the calmest parents get angry at their children some of the time. Did your children do anything in the past seven days to make you angry?
- Assume behavior and ask about frequencies (presupposition)
 - How many cigarettes do you smoke a day?
 - Danger of insulting those who do not engage in behavior
- Use of authority
 - Wine has recently been shown to reduce cholesterol levels and improve digestion.....followed by questions of interest.

Doing something ever vs. right now

- Undesirable behavior
 - Recent behavior is most threatening
 - Ask “ever” question before “current behavior”
- Desirable behavior
 - More threatening to admit *never* doing something than to admit within a short time frame or more recently not doing something
 - Tradeoff between social desirability and sufficient observations for rare events



Self-Administration and Reports of Illicit Drug Use:
Ratios of Estimated Prevalence Under Self- and
Interviewer Administration, Tourangeau & Smith (1996)

Guidelines for Threatening Questions about Behavior*

1. Use open-ended questions rather than closed questions
 - Middle category seen as typical response (extreme categories = unusual)
2. Use familiar words
 - “having sex” vs. “sexual intercourse”
3. Possibility for informants
4. Starting with lifetime questions may help
 - *“Did you ever even once not pay your taxes?”*
5. Deliberately load question
 - Presuppose behavior: *“When was the last time you?”*
 - Casual approach: *“Do you happen to have ...?”*

*adapted from Sudman & Bradburn (1982)

END OF VIDEO 5