

Research Methods (HDFS 3390),
Alan Reifman, Texas Tech University
Maximizing Accuracy of Self-Reports

Intentionally False Responding and Ways to Overcome It

"Respondents in surveys seem to lie for pretty much the same reasons they lie in everyday life – to avoid embarrassment or possible repercussions from disclosing sensitive information..."

(Tourangeau & Yan [2007]. Sensitive questions in surveys. *Psychological Bulletin*, p. 878)



- Denying bad or inflating good behavior
 - [Tsunami-relief donation example](#)
 - [Infidelity example](#)
 - [Religious-service attendance example](#)
- Wanting to look informed
 - Supreme Court [example](#)

Combating Intentionally False Responding

Use one or more of the following to throw out subjects' data or make statistical corrections:

- Social Desirability Scale, given *in addition* to your questionnaires of primary interest (see Appendix L of [linked document](#); plus Waring & Reddon, 1983, article on measuring marital intimacy in *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, via TTU library website)
- Contradictory answering (Examples: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#))
- Direct biochemical/physical verification or simply making respondents *think* their answers can be independently verified ("bogus pipeline"; [example](#))
- Bogus items ([example](#))
- Indirect external confirmation ([cocaine-use example](#); [sexual-behavior example](#))

Note that some of these remedies can pinpoint if an *individual respondent* is providing false answers, whereas others can only detect misreporting for respondents *as a group*.

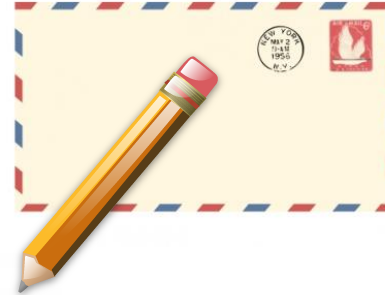
Unintentional Forms of Inaccurate Responding

- Inattentive responding (not trying hard, not taking questionnaire seriously)
 - **REMEDY:** Include items to “catch” inattentive answers, possibly exclude respondents with large number of them (see “Infrequency Scale” in this [document](#); also “[Directed Responses](#)”).
- Cognitive/memory limits
 - **REMEDY:** [Timeline Follow-Back](#) methods (calendar with events to aid memory)
- [Acquiescence](#) (tendency to agree with whatever proposition is before you)
 - **REMEDY:** Use [forced-choice instead](#) (the long-used technique of reverse or alternate items, e.g., mixing positively and negatively toned items such as “I feel happy” and “I feel sad,” has fallen into disfavor among researchers; [here](#) and [here](#)).
- Order in which questions are asked (Order Effects)
 - A humorous example of which is seen in this [video clip](#) from the British TV show "Yes, Prime Minister."
 - **REMEDY:** Have different versions of the survey (e.g., Form A and Form B), where each form presents the questions in different orders.

Ways (Modes) of Collecting Self-Report Data and the Trade-offs Involved

Traditional, "Old Fashioned" Approaches:

- **Self-Administered Questionnaire**
("paper and pencil," "snail mail")
- **Face-to-Face Interview**
- **Telephone Interview**



[Good overview of these methods](#)
(University of Illinois, Chicago)

Video on "[Methods of Collecting Survey Data](#)"
(Elon University)

One issue with survey modes is the degree to which they allow for **clarification** when respondents are **confused** over the meaning of a word or phrase. On p. 86 of this [document](#), a bullet-point list appears of five possible ways to clarify.

Instructions: For each statement, please check whether you Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree

| My college classes are . . . | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| more demanding than my high school classes. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| more interesting than my high school classes. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| more interactive than my high school classes. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| larger than my high school classes. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Survey Experts' Conclusions

“Respondents are less likely to overreport socially desirable behaviors and to underreport socially undesirable ones when the questions are **self-administered**, when the... **bogus pipeline** is used, and when the data are collected in **private** (or at least away from the respondent's parents).”

“Even when the questions are self-administered, whether by computer or on paper, many respondents **still misreport** when they answer **sensitive** questions.”

[Tourangeau and Yan](#) (2007, p. 878)

Newer, Technology-Driven Approaches

Link, M. W. et al. (2014). Mobile technologies for conducting, augmenting and potentially replacing surveys: Executive summary of the AAPOR Task Force on Emerging Technologies in Public Opinion Research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 78, 779-787 ([full text](#))

- "The emergence of mobile devices -- with a host of integrated features including voice, photography, video, text, email, GPS, and apps -- has opened the door to a new generation of measurement tools for those who study public opinion, attitudes and behaviors as well as other sociological phenomena" (p. 780).
- "... the use of mobile phones for survey research and related data-collection uses is not simply an extension of previous methodologies, but combines elements of traditional computer-assisted interviewing (CAI) systems, online data collection, and additional, new elements" (p. 781).
- Surveys that are designed to be taken on a computer from a website are taken by many respondents on a mobile device. Difficulties that can arise include: difficult viewing due to **small screen size**, displays appearing different on different devices, mobile "dead spots," and people being used to doing only **quick tasks** on their devices. Surveys should thus be brief. Surveys taken via mobile tend to have "higher abandonment rates." (See pp. 781-782 for details.)

Further Resources on Survey Technology

- "[The Evolving World of Survey Research](#)"
- "[Technological Innovations in Data Collection](#)" (a bit old, but very thorough)
- UC San Francisco [survey overview](#) document; contains a lot of computer-assisted technologies
- Pew Research Center page on [Collecting Survey Data](#) discusses cell phone, internet, and other modalities.
- Netherlands document on [using smartphones](#) for survey research
- Computer-designed surveys are very effective for automating "skip-patterns" or "branching" -- using someone's answer to one question to [send them directly to another question](#) and skip unnecessary ones
- Examples of what [surveys look like](#) on smartphones

Additional Links on Self-Report Measurement

Question Wording, Online Surveys, Survey Modes, and Survey Facilities

- Video: "[7 Tips for Good Survey Questions](#)" (Elon University)
- [Dramatic example](#) of question-wording effect ("gay men and lesbians" vs. "homosexuals" in military; February 2010)
- Question-wording example on [whether Trump should be impeached](#) (June 2019)
- Texas Tech's [Earl Survey Research Lab](#) (conducts telephone and mail surveys)
- [Survey Practice](#), a journal with practical articles on conducting surveys
- My [Health Care Polls](#) website, which among other things, examines the wording of survey items
- Lists ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) of sites that host web-based surveys (virtually all such hosting sites charge a fee, but some provide free services for a limited amount of time or limited-size surveys).
- [Conducting a Survey in Cuba](#), a "closed and closely monitored society" (April 9, 2015)
- Do "progress indicators" at the bottom of the pages of online surveys (see example below) prevent respondents from quitting in the middle? Apparently, [not very much](#).



You are 66% done.