

Measuring Subgroup Variation in Social Judgment Research: A Factorial Survey Approach

Bryan Byers

Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, Ball State University

and

Richard A. Zeller

Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University

Factorial survey research has become increasingly popular in recent years as an efficient and effective methodology for the measurement of social judgments. In addition to the effects of dimensions and levels varied in factorial survey design, researchers often examine the impact of subgroup, or respondent, characteristics. However, the literature on subgroup variations does not reveal systematic differences among subgroups. Not previously examined in factorial survey research, and the focus of the present study, is whether or not subgroup attributes contribute to the variance in social judgments. The results suggest that subgroups, consistent with previous literature, often do not differ in social judgments. Interpretations are offered to account for the findings. © 1998 Academic Press

Measuring differences based on characteristics of respondents in social and behavioral science research has been a mainstay of the empirical study of human conduct and attitude. Within social science research, variability, as determined by the coefficient of determination, may be explained in two general ways. First, change in a dependent variable may be based on corresponding change in the independent variable(s). Second, variability may be explained based on sample characteristics. That is, each collection of subjects may be delineated and described based on a host of social and demographic characteristics, not the least of which are gender, race, SES, and religion. The present research is concerned with the latter form of variation in social science research—modeling and measuring subgroup characteristics in factorial-survey research.

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Address reprint requests to Dr. Bryan Byers, Dept. of Criminal Justice and Criminology, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306.

MEASURING SUBGROUP VARIATION

Rossi and Anderson (1982), in the factorial-survey method, recommend testing for possible subgroup differences in the rendering of social judgments when using the factorial-survey approach. This may be done by identifying specific characteristics of interest within the respondent group or sample and conducting separate statistical analyses.

The factorial-survey method, as presented by Rossi and Anderson (1982), presents subjects with multiple forms of a single vignette; each form of the vignette includes items which are made to vary. For example, in one vignette, the lead character may be male, 65 years of age, Hispanic, and have an annual income of \$20,000. In another vignette, this person may be female, 35 years of age, White, and have an annual income of \$50,000. Thus, gender, age, race, and income are made to vary across vignettes. Each subject responds to multiple vignettes containing sets of randomly assigned independent variable (independent variables are referred to as "dimensions") attributes (values that a dimension may take are referred to as "levels"). Responses to these different vignettes can then be predicted from the attributes which were varied from vignette to vignette.

This study utilized nine dimensions, or independent variables, in a larger study of responsibility attributions made toward hypothetical elder self-neglect cases by elder abuse investigators (Byers and Zeller, 1995). The independent variable dimensions included victim age, household income, victim disability, number of prior investigator contacts, prior cooperation with social services, family presence and involvement, the victim's social demeanor, the nature of the self-neglect (and related consequences), and the current level of victim cooperation. The dependent variable was as measure of "how responsible is the victim for this situation" and was elicited with a nine-point scale ranging from "not very responsible" to "very responsible" (Byers and Zeller, 1995).

Consistent with the methodological and statistical procedures offered by Rossi and Anderson (1982), there are certain assumptions about modeling subgroup variation in factorial-survey research one might consider (Rossi and Anderson, 1982: 23). They are as follows:

Assumption #1: Subgroups may vary in the average levels of judgments rendered or the mean of J_q does not equal the mean of J_m . These are referred to as "judgment thresholds." where,

J_q is a judgment in group q; and

J_m is a judgment in group m.

Assumption #2: Subgroups may differ in the variability of their judgments or the variance of J_q does not equal the variance of J_m . This is referred to as "judgment variance."

Assumption #3: Subgroups may vary in the extent of the normal stochastic error in the model or $1 - R_q^2$ does not equal $1 - R_m^2$. This is called "judgment error." where,

R_q^2 is a multiple correlation in group q; and

R_m^2 is a multiple correlation in group m.

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