



Isolating frequency scale effects on self-reported loneliness

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Abstract

Response options presented on questionnaires affect self-reports concerning the frequency of loneliness. Two experiments using items from the UCLA Loneliness Scale—Version 3 (ULS) presented participants with either of two response option ranges. In Experiment 1, response options in the high-frequency condition ranged from “Every Day” to “Never.” In the low-frequency condition, response options ranged from “Once a month or more often” to “Never.” In Experiment 2, response options ranged from “Every Day” to “Never” in the high-frequency condition and from “Once a week or more often” to “Never” in the low-frequency condition. Results confirmed that self-reported frequency of experiences related to loneliness increased when participants were presented with response options emphasizing higher frequency. Implications for the ULS in particular, and questionnaire design in general, are discussed.

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Many self-administered questionnaires instruct respondents to indicate “their” answer by choosing from a selection of response options, i.e., closed-answer alternatives. However, response options are more than a device by which researchers gather information from respondents. Rather, response options can also convey information (albeit unwittingly, sometimes) from researchers to their respondents (see Schwarz, 1990, 1999; Schwarz & Hippler, 1991, for reviews).

When a questionnaire provides a range of frequencies from which to choose, respondents presume the frequency range reflects the researcher’s knowledge and/or expectations concerning the normal distribution of the target experience (Gaskell, O’Muircheartaigh, & Wright, 1994; Menon, Raghubir, & Schwarz, 1995; Schwarz, 1990, 1999; Schwarz & Bienias, 1990; Schwarz &

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Hippler, 1991; Schwarz, Hippler, Deutsch, & Strack, 1985; Schwarz & Strack, 1999; Schwarz, Strack, Muller, & Chassein, 1988). This expectation influences self-reports. For instance, Schwarz, Hippler, Deutsch, and Strack's experiment asking Germans how many hours per day they spend watching television found that participants presented with response options ranging from "up to $2\frac{1}{2}$ " to "more than $4\frac{1}{2}$," reported they watch television more frequently than did participants presented with response options ranging from "up to $\frac{1}{2}$ " to "more than $2\frac{1}{2}$." This effect of high-frequency response options has been replicated in studies targeting several subjective experiences, including anger, annoyance, pain, psychosomatic complaints, and perceived personal safety (Gaskell et al.; Schwarz & Scheuring's study reported in Schwarz, 1999; Schwarz et al., 1988; Winkielman, Knauper, & Schwarz, 1998).

Researchers have proposed a variety of mechanisms that could cause this effect. An overarching explanation is that respondents asked to self-report the frequency of mundane behaviors do not recall and count specific instances, but instead employ heuristics to arrive at an estimate (Burton & Blair, 1991; Menon et al., 1995; Schwarz, 1990, 1999; Schwarz & Bienias, 1990; Schwarz & Hippler, 1991). The frequency range presented in response options, therefore, becomes increasingly influential for target experiences that occur with less regularity (Menon et al., 1995) and also as the target reporting period is extended (Burton & Blair, 1991).

Respondents also appear to use the response option frequency range as a tool to help them disambiguate vaguely defined target experiences (Gaskell et al., 1994; Schwarz, 1990, 1999; Schwarz & Hippler, 1991; Schwarz et al., 1988; Winkielman et al., 1998). Winkielman, et al., for example, found that participants interpreted the target experience, anger, less extremely when the questionnaire provided response options emphasizing high frequency.

Another possible explanation may be what Fiedler and Armbruster (1994) have termed the category-split effect. This theory posits that breaking a subcategory into smaller units causes an illusion whereby judgments of frequency increase. Hence, asking respondents to judge the frequency of Honda, Nissan, Toyota, Mazda, Daihatsu and Mitsubishi automobiles would be expected to yield a higher cumulative estimate than if respondents were asked to estimate the frequency of Japanese automobiles. Similarly, the number of respondents endorsing a time frequency could increase if that category is split into a number of smaller units.

Intentional editing due to self-presentational concerns is another mechanism that might cause the high-frequency response option effect in some instances. Respondents have been shown to underreport a number of sensitive behaviors and experiences, including racist attitudes, drug abuse, alcohol consumption, smoking, abortion, energy consumption, crime victimization and criminal behavior (see Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000, for a review). Sudman and Bradburn (1982) advised that questions tapping sensitive or threatening experiences yield more valid responses if phrased in terms suggesting: "everybody does it" (p. 75). By analogy, response options emphasizing higher frequency could serve to minimize the apparent aberrance of the target experience, thereby inducing respondents to feel less need to edit their response (Schwarz, 1990). Strong empirical evidence to support this idea has not yet been provided. Prior studies have shown that self-reports of socially undesirable experiences can be affected by high-frequency response options (see, e.g., Tourangeau & Smith, 1996). However, prior research has not isolated the impact of self-presentational concerns from the other mechanisms outlined above.

Psychologists have conducted most of the studies demonstrating the effects of frequency response alternatives. Nevertheless, it appears no prior study has explored whether measures

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