

Self-Administered Field Surveys on Sensitive Topics

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Summary

In this article, Nanes et al. propose self-enumeration as an effective tool to increase response rates and to reduce biases in surveys related to sensitive topics.

Self enumeration is a method of data collection in which respondents are given the task of filling out a survey form themselves, rather than having an interviewer ask them questions in person.

To investigate the influence of self-enumeration on survey results, Nanes et al. conducted a study in the Sorsogon Province, a rural area in the Philippines, which is known as a hotspot of the New People's Army (NPA), a communist terror organization seeking to overthrow the government.

Two questions were posed to 15 randomly selected adults from each of the 289 districts present in Sorsogon Province.

The first question, serving as a placebo, or reference question, was asking whether the participant has completed high school. The second question, considered a highly sensitive one, was tackling their willingness to report activities of insurgents, indirectly referring to the NPA, to authorities.

Participants were randomly assigned to three groups, each group was answering the two questions in a different form, either verbally with an interviewer (direct-enumeration), via self-enumeration using a tablet, or via forced choice, involving a coin flip procedure to keep responses private.

Regarding responses, the authors find that subjects were more likely to answer the question about reporting insurgents using self-enumeration (74.8%) or forced choice (79.1%) than direct questioning by an interviewer (71.0%). They reason that self-enumeration may reduce social desirability bias by shielding answers from the enumerator, or by reducing the likelihood of an onlooker overhearing.

They further claim that the presence of the enumerator is the most likely cause of nonresponse under direct enumeration, more so than onlookers, probably because enumerators might be viewed as authorities.

Regarding type of response, direct and self-enumeration yielded similar responses on both the placebo question and the sensitive question. On the other hand, the forced choice method decreased affirmative responses by about 50% for the placebo and 41% for the sensitive question. The authors argue that this difference might be due to confusion or non-compliance from respondents in the forced choice set up.

In general, the authors argue against forced choice strategies.

While the authors fail to find conclusive evidence that self-enumeration reduces enumerator-induced social desirability bias, they show that it yields responses that are at least as accurate as verbal response and more accurate than forced choice.

Reflection and thoughts

As students with a University affiliated E-Mail address, we are constantly invited from other students to participate in their surveys. A survey is often the only way to accumulate data in a lot of research fields, and according to the phrase “garbage in, garbage out”, the collection of the data is often the most crucial step to achieve meaningful results.

Many challenges arise in this step that can lead to false and biased results, which are often not easy to identify, since different, or even opposing outcomes might be equally plausible. Especially sensitive questions hold the potential to introduce biases into the data.

The article from Nanes et al. tries to tackle this long list of possible pitfalls with proposing self-enumeration as an alternative to direct-enumeration and forced choice approaches, to minimize certain biases, especially non responses due to social desirability.

The authors openly reflect on the shortcomings of their method, such as the difficulty to deduct the influence of the coin flip on the result of the forced choice option, or other factors which can not be excluded to have influenced the results.

Especially interesting for me was the hypothesis that subjects would publicly refuse to report activities of anti-government groups to authorities, due to fear of the group itself, which might be heavily active in the surrounding area. So the social desirability might flip according to the region where the survey is conducted and should always be taken into account.

Among other raised points in the study, this train of thought shows the range of possible explanations why results are the way they are, making it difficult to pinpoint potential biases and flawed survey strategies.

As stated in the beginning, data collection is essential in many fields, so it is also in Biology. As a bioinformatician, I deal daily with biases and confounding factors, resulting not from surveys, but from experiments performed from different people, on different time points, with different experience and accuracy. While self-examination might not make much sense in this context, it might do in a clinical set-up and generally in medicine research, where patient metadata used in personalized medicine stems from.

Patient metadata, such as age, sex, smoker or not smoker, or previous therapies, can be highly relevant and should always be taken into account, or excluded as non-relevant factor for treatment success or failure. Self-examination might help in getting a more accurate picture of the patient.

An improvement to this study design could be to include more questions in the survey, placebo, as well as sensitive ones. While this most likely increases the workload and time for each survey, it would make the results and statistics more meaningful.

Also, the introduction of the coin flip caused more confusion than it was helpful it appears, a future study might consider to not include such a method and look for alternatives.

Interesting could also be to conduct such a study in an area where anti-government groups do not have a high standing, where uttering support is far more dangerous than in a rural area.

One last and maybe a bit of provocative thought is my impression that the advantages of self-examination, although presenting some surprises in the results, are self-explanatory and certain results could have been quite easily foreseen without conducting such a large study.