

# Response Paper: Self-Administered Field Surveys on Sensitive Topics

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## 1 Summary

The study in [2] explores different strategies to reduce response bias in surveys, particularly on sensitive topics. The authors note that social desirability often influences in-person surveys, causing non-response and falsification, resulting in bias and noise. Common techniques used to combat response bias include randomization techniques such as list experiments, endorsement experiments, and forced choice. However, randomization methods have limitations such as high cognitive demands on subjects and enumerators, measurement error, and reduced measurement precision.

As an alternative to randomization techniques self-administered surveys can reduce response bias. Studies [3] suggest that self-administration reduces non-response and preference falsification. However, the evidence is mostly from online surveys or pencil-and-paper surveys conducted in developed countries [1]. The authors test whether allowing subjects to privately record their responses reduces social desirability bias in a context that matches the conditions faced by researchers studying sensitive topics relating to conflict and development.

The authors conducted an experiment in a rural, conflict-affected province in the Philippines, where respondents were asked about their willingness to

report insurgent activities using a direct verbal response, self-enumeration, or forced choice. For each subject they asked a placebo and a sensitive question with the same method. For self-enumeration the subjects secretly entered the answers on a tablet. The randomization technique forced-choice introduces a coin flip, so that when the coin is landing on heads the subject should answer honestly, but if it lands on tails the subject should always say yes. The results show that self-enumeration significantly increased response rates but did not reduce the rate of reporting socially undesirable behaviors. In contrast, forced choice resulted in high rates of confusion and highly inaccurate results.

The authors suggest that self-enumeration provides a low-cost method of increasing response rates without introducing the complications of randomized measurement devices. The paper concludes that while self-enumeration is not a panacea for all problems, it is an effective tool to reduce response bias in surveys.

## 2 Discussion

The results of this study suggest that self-administered surveys can be effective in reducing non-response rates when measuring sensitive topics, such as willingness to report insurgent activities to the police. Self-enumeration was found to significantly increase response rates compared to direct questioning, while forced choice yielded highly inaccurate results due to confusion among respondents. These findings highlight the importance of carefully considering the survey method used when studying sensitive topics, as well as the potential benefits of using self-administration in such contexts.

One limitation of this study is that it only focuses on one sensitive topic in one specific context (citizens' willingness to report insurgent activities in a rural province in the Philippines). Future research could explore the generalizability of these findings to other sensitive topics and contexts. Additionally, while self-enumeration was found to increase response rates, it did not significantly affect the rate of reporting socially undesirable behaviours. As the authors mentioned they did not anticipate that so many interviews would occur in the presence of bystanders, leaving room for interpretation of the results. The authors propose that the inflating effect of the enumerator's presence and the deflating effect of social desirability bias from onlookers (they possibly report back to the insurgents) on affirmative responses could cancel each other out, but this needs more analysis or an improved experi-

mental setting.

Another important consideration is the potential for measurement error in self-administered surveys. While self-administration may reduce social desirability bias, it can also introduce errors due to misinterpretation of questions or mistakes in data entry. Therefore, it is important to carefully design and pilot survey instruments to minimize measurement error.

Finally, it is worth noting that the use of electronic tablets for self-administered surveys may not be feasible or practical in all contexts, particularly in low-resource settings. In such cases, pencil-and-paper surveys or other methods of self-administration may be more appropriate.

## References

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