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Eliciting the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth: The effect of question phrasing on deception

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ABSTRACT

In strategic information exchanges (such as negotiations and job interviews), different question formulations communicate information about the question asker, and systematically influence the veracity of responses. We demonstrate this function of questions by contrasting *Negative Assumption* questions that presuppose a problem, *Positive Assumption* questions that presuppose the absence of a problem, and *General* questions that do not reference a problem. In Study 1, Negative Assumption questions promoted greater disclosure of undesirable work-related behaviors than Positive Assumption or General questions did. In Study 2, Negative Assumption questions increased disclosure of undesirable information in face-to-face job recruitment meetings, relative to Positive Assumption questions and General questions. Study 3 demonstrated that the relationship we identify between question type and the veracity of responses is driven by inferences of assertiveness and knowledgeability about the question asker. Finally, in Study 4, asking assertive questions with regard to uncommon behaviors led the question asker to be evaluated more negatively.

1. Introduction

Imagine finding your dream apartment. Before signing the lease, you ask the landlord: “How are the neighbors?” “Oh, they’re great!” comes the reply. You soon learn that “great” includes wild parties, undisciplined children, and a barking dog. As you listen to the loud music blaring from your neighbors’ apartment, you wonder what you might have done differently. After all, you *did ask* about the neighbors.

In the present research, we investigate the effect of different question types on truthful information disclosure. We theorize that in addition to serving as vehicles for soliciting information, questions reveal information about the question asker that influences disclosure. We introduce and test our theoretical framework across four experiments involving *strategic information exchanges* in which individuals are motivated to withhold private information.

Deception is a pervasive challenge in strategic information exchanges ranging from negotiations, to job interviews, to consumer purchases, to international diplomacy (Barry & Rehel, 2014; Donahue, Lewicki, & Robert, 2000). These interactions are characterized by information asymmetry and information dependence (Akerlof, 1970; Gino & Moore, 2008; Lewicki & Stark, 1996). In these settings, individuals have access to privileged information that would enable their counterparts to make informed decisions (Lewicki & Robinson, 1998).

Within these interactions, individuals often have both the opportunity and the incentive to deceive others to promote their self-interest (Boles, Croson, & Murnighan, 2000; Olekalns & Smith, 2007; Steinel & De Dreu, 2004; Zhong, 2011). That is, self-serving lies advantage the deceiver at the expense of the target (Gneezy, 2005; Levine & Schweitzer, 2014; Yip & Schweitzer, 2016; Zhong, Ku, Lount, & Murnighan, 2006). Such self-serving deception can take different forms, including active misrepresentations (Gneezy, 2005; Levine & Schweitzer, 2014; Steinel, 2015), intentional omissions (Bok, 2011; Gaspar & Schweitzer, 2013; John, Barasz, & Norton, 2016; Olekalns & Smith, 2009), and the use of truthful statements to create a misleading impression (Rogers, Zeckhauser, Gino, Schweitzer, & Norton, 2014). For example, a job candidate might mischaracterize her past experience, a car seller might fail to report known damage, or a negotiator might misrepresent the value of a competing offer. Thus, in strategic information exchanges such as negotiations, the information exchange process is both critical (Thompson, 1991) and often frustrated by the prevalence of deception (Bazerman, Curhan, Moore, & Valley, 2000;

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Gino, 2015; Zhong, 2011).

The existing negotiations literature has considered a number of interpersonal antecedents of deception, such as power (Koning, Steinel, Van Beest, & Van Dijk, 2011; Pitesa & Thau, 2013), emotion (Moran & Schweitzer, 2008; Van Dijk, Van Kleef, Steinel, & Van Beest, 2008; Wang, Northcraft, & Van Kleef, 2012), competition (Schweitzer, DeChurch, & Gibson, 2005), and trust (Lount, Zhong, Sivanathan, & Murnighan, 2008; Yip & Schweitzer, 2015). However, surprisingly little research has investigated how characteristics of the conversation influence the use of deception in negotiation settings. And although scholars have enthusiastically encouraged negotiators to ask questions (e.g., Malhotra & Bazerman, 2007; Nierenberg, 1986; Shell, 2006; Thompson, 2014), no prior work has experimentally tested the relative effectiveness of different types of questions in eliciting honest disclosure in negotiations, or proposed a coherent theory to predict why some questions may be more effective than others.

Reflecting this lack of experimental evidence, the advice offered in the literature is often vague and contradictory. For example, Schweitzer and Croson (1999, p. 244) argue that "negotiators should increase the number of direct questions they ask" to curtail their risk of being deceived. In contrast, Malhotra and Bazerman (2007, p. 40) encourage negotiators to "ask questions that are less direct—and less threatening." Taken together, prior work suggests that asking questions in negotiations is important, but offers little in terms of concrete guidance (Miles, 2013).

In our investigation, we develop a theoretical framework, use this framework to identify distinct question types, and contrast the effectiveness of these different types of questions for eliciting honest disclosures in strategic information exchanges in which respondents are motivated to withhold unfavorable facts. We experimentally test whether different types of questions lead to different levels of disclosure, and demonstrate that variance in disclosures can be explained by respondents making different inferences about the question-asker, based on the type of question that was asked. We propose a novel framework that conceptualizes questions as speech acts that not only *solicit* information from the respondent, but also *reveal* information about the asker.

1.1. The functions of questions

Linguists have long recognized that questions fulfill a number of conversational functions (Clark, 1996). Some of these functions are structural. For example, the question: "And what happened next?" moves the narrative forward, and the question: "Do you know what I mean?" pauses the narrative to ensure understanding. The most fundamental function of questions, according to linguistics, is to elicit information (e.g., Loos, Anderson, Day, Jordan, & Wingate, 2004).

Across disciplines, however, scholars have noted that subtle changes in question phrasing affect the content of the replies. According to Grice (1989), different questions communicate the desired topic and level of detail of a reply by invoking conversational norms. The question: "How are the neighbors?" invokes norms that guide the conversation to general information about the neighbors, without dictating revelation of specific aspects of the neighbors' behavior, either negative or positive.

Related work in psychology has shown that the phrasing of questions can convey information that guides responses (Loftus & Palmer, 1974; Loftus & Zanni, 1975; Loftus, 1975; Smith & Ellsworth, 1987). For example, Loftus and Palmer (1974) found that participants who were asked to estimate the speed of two cars in a video that "smashed" into each other provided higher estimates than participants who were asked to estimate the speed of two cars that "bumped" into each other. This body of research also found that questions could guide participants to recall objects and events that they had never actually observed if the researcher's question presupposed these objects and events (Loftus, 1975; Smith and Ellsworth, 1987). For example, Loftus (1975) found that significantly more participants who were asked "How fast was the white sports car going when it passed the barn while traveling along the country road?" directly after viewing a video tape recalled seeing a barn (that did not actually exist) one week later than participants who were asked "How fast was the white sports car going while traveling along the country road?"

More recent research has found that questions can communicate information about how appropriate the question askers consider particular behaviors to be. This research has found that slight differences in phrasing of similarly structured questions influence respondents' perceptions of how normative a potentially risky, unethical or socially undesirable behavior is (DiFranceisco, McAuliffe, & Sikkema, 1998; John, Acquisti, & Loewenstein, 2011; Raghubir & Menon, 1996; Williams, Block, & Fitzsimons, 2006).

In fact, scholarly work across a number of disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, psychology, political science, public health, and criminology, suggests that question phrasing may influence responses and behavior by communicating information about the question asker's assumptions, knowledge, intentions, and expectations (Belli, Moore & Vanhoewyk, 2006; Belli, Traugott, Young & McGonagle, 1999; Catania, Binson, Canchola, Pollack, & Coates, 2017; Holtgraves, Eck, & Lasky, 1997; Jochen & Valkenburg, 2011; Näher & Krumpal, 2012; Presser, 1990; Waismel-manor & Sarid, 2017). These findings, however, lack a coherent theoretical framework and have surveyed a wide variety of question types without an organizing structure.

In the present research, we build on this extant literature to study questions in strategic information exchanges, contexts in which one party is motivated to withhold the truth. We create a framework and show that different types of questions systematically communicate information about the question asker's assumptions and expectations that influence the veracity of responses. Specifically, we consider two types of assumptions question askers are likely to make in strategic information exchanges—the assumption that a particular problem does not exist, which we term "positive assumption" questions, and the assumption that the a particular problem does exist, which we term "negative assumption" questions. For example, the positive assumption question, "The neighbors are quiet, right?" solicits information about the neighbors' noise levels, but implicitly assumes that noise is not a problem. In contrast, the negative assumption question, "How noisy are the neighbors?" solicits information about the same subject, but implicitly assumes that the neighbors are noisy. We contrast the positive and negative assumption questions to general questions that do not make an implicit assumption, such as "How are the neighbors?"

We postulate that individuals routinely, but perhaps unwittingly, use questions to make inferences about the knowledge and intentions of the question asker, ultimately affecting the veracity of their responses. When asked a positive assumption question, such as "The neighbors are quiet, right?" respondents may infer that the question asker has some relevant information, but is unlikely to pursue an assertive line of questioning. Conversely, when asked a negative assumption question, "How noisy are the neighbors?" respondents may infer that the question asker both has relevant information and is likely to pursue an assertive line of questioning. As a result, negative assumption questions are most likely to elicit truthful disclosure about an underlying problem related to noisy neighbors. Finally, both negative and positive assumption questions are likely to elicit greater information disclosure than general questions, because respondents are unlikely to infer from general questions that the question asker either has relevant information or is likely to pursue an assertive line of inquiry.

1.2. Questions and deception

Our research contributes to both the negotiation literature and the broader body of research on deception by providing a framework for why different types of questions might lead to different patterns of disclosure. Although fields like sociology have considered related