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Three experimental approaches to measure the social context dependence of prejudice communication and discriminatory behavior

Heiko Beyer^{a,*}, Ulf Liebe^b^a University of Wuppertal, Department of Sociology, Gausstrasse 20, 42119 Wuppertal, Germany^b University of Bern, Institute of Sociology, Fabrikstrasse 8, 3012 Bern, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Empirical research on discrimination is faced with crucial problems stemming from the specific character of its object of study. In democratic societies the communication of prejudices and other forms of discriminatory behavior is considered socially undesirable and depends on situational factors such as whether a situation is considered private or whether a discriminatory consensus can be assumed. Regular surveys thus can only offer a blurred picture of the phenomenon. But also survey experiments intended to decrease the social desirability bias (SDB) so far failed in systematically implementing situational variables. This paper introduces three experimental approaches to improve the study of discrimination and other topics of social (un-)desirability. First, we argue in favor of cognitive context framing in surveys in order to operationalize the salience of situational norms. Second, factorial surveys offer a way to take situational contexts and substitute behavior into account. And third, choice experiments – a rather new method in sociology – offer a more valid method of measuring behavioral characteristics compared to simple items in surveys. All three approaches – which may be combined – are easy to implement in large-scale surveys. Results of empirical studies demonstrate the fruitfulness of each of these approaches.

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1. Introduction

The study of discrimination is confronted with one of the most severe problems of empirical research: its research object is modified by the measurement instrument. In the last decades, the concept of “political correctness” has become one of the central elements in the self-definition of Western societies. Although such a normative framework is far from fully integrated in the social common sense, most individuals consider issues of discrimination “thorny”. It follows that the majority of the population in democratic countries will try to prevent being labeled “racist”, “sexist”, “homophobic”, etc. by social researchers or in public (e.g., by journalists, politicians, teachers). In the words of survey psychology: those are “sensitive topics” and “sensitive topics” imply “socially desirable” answers (see Lee, 1993; Tourangeau et al., 2009). Hence, prejudice research, like all research dealing with sensitive topics, is faced with the unpleasant question of how standardized surveys can be expected to collect valid data if the item wordings are considered highly sensitive and are very likely to involve the violation of a perceived social norm.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: hbeyer@uni-wuppertal.de (H. Beyer), ulf.liebe@soz.unibe.ch (U. Liebe).

Since Barton's review in *Asking the Embarrassing Question* (1958), the *social desirability bias* (SDB) in surveys has become an important topic for social researchers, and a differentiated field of study has evolved. Sudman and Bradburn (1974), for example, show that individuals tend to underreport normative or private behavior like crimes, sexual activities, or drug use. But also seemingly less delicate topics such as income (Moore et al., 2000), charity donations (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011), physical activity (Adams et al., 2005) and voting (Belli et al., 2001) have been found to be subject to non- or misreporting.

At the same time during which SDB became a relevant topic for attitude research, survey experiments gained influence. Those experiments have focused on the systematic variation of "(i) the formulation of the choice, (ii) the context of the choice, or (iii) the characteristics of the chooser" (Sniderman and Grob, 1996, p. 387), where (i) refers to the wording or framing of a survey item, (ii) to the respondent's social environment, and (iii) to his or her (variable) features such as "mood, affective state, and cognitive orientation" (Sniderman and Grob, 1996, p. 387).

The advancement of SDB research and of experimental survey designs are interlinked with each other, since many experimental tools were directly developed to address the problem of social desirable answering in standard surveys. Apart from experiments varying the data collection mode, interviewer and bystander presence as well as the question wordings and question contexts, special methods such as the "bogus pipeline procedure" (Jones and Sigall, 1971), the "randomized response technique" (Warner, 1965), the "unmatched count technique" (Raghavarao and Federer, 1979) and the "nominative technique" (Miller, 1985) have been developed to deal with the problem (for a review see Krumpal, 2013).

This paper adds to this experimental research on issues of social desirability in general and discriminatory attitudes in particular by contributing three survey-based experimental designs. Those three methods respond to a general shortcoming in the existing literature, namely the ignorance regarding theoretical developments in the respective fields. Theories on prejudice, for example, have highlighted that various situational factors come into play when individuals decide to discriminate or not. The social context, however, has hardly been operationalized in empirical studies so far. Although, SDB research has shown (see Tourangeau and Yan, 2007) that respondents' decisions about which category to choose in a survey depend on their interpretation of the survey situation (i.e., salient cognitions at that point in time) it failed to take this idea a step further and to realize that this is only a specific case of a more general problem. Not only the survey context but the social context in general needs methodological attention since only a procedure that implements such social contexts would offer data that reflect the everyday reality of discrimination.

The issue of situational context dependence is accounted for in our experiments in the following way: The first study we will present is a *context framing experiment*. We asked interviewees both for their own and their best friend's opinion towards Jews¹ and varied the order of the respective questions to find out whether the activation of an anti-Semitic opinion of a friend might set the stage for reporting more openly one's own prejudices against Jews. Although, this sort of question order variation has been applied in studies to test for neutralization techniques regarding criminal behavior (see Schwarz and Bayer, 1989; Bohner et al., 1998), to our knowledge it has never been used to tackle social undesirable attitudes. The context framing experiment offers a way to manipulate the cognitive presence of a situational desensitization trigger, here a peer group norm, which influences the willingness to communicate about sensitive topics. In contrast to the "nominative technique" it does not take the perceived opinion about others (e.g., friends) as de facto information but instead uses it as (self-generated) cognitive reference which maps specific social situations. Also overestimation is not so much an issue compared to the "nominative technique" (see Miller, 1985), because the assumption of a "true-score" which might not be correctly estimated is loosened.

The *factorial survey* (Rossi, 1979), implemented in the second study, takes this approach a step further. Here various situational characteristics can be implemented in the design of the survey. The factorial survey (or vignette) design is a procedure where respondents are confronted with a situational description which has to be evaluated. In contrast to other factorial surveys, however, we only used one vignette per respondent. Usually respondents have to evaluate a couple of vignettes that differ according to the situational/experimental factors, that is, the independent variables (see Wallander, 2009, p. 513). In this set-up respondents are basically able to compare vignettes, and might get an idea about the research interest and thus might answer in a social desirable manner (if the topic is considered sensitive). This is not the case if we limit the number of vignettes to just one per respondent (see Jann, 2008).

Finally, in the third study we conducted a *discrete choice experiment* (Louviere et al., 2000), a method that is fundamentally new to most sociologists. The design of a choice experiment is similar to that of a factorial survey but comprises choices between alternatives rather than absolute evaluations of a single situation; instead of rating a statement respondents are asked to choose one item from a set of alternatives. This way (discriminatory) preferences are not measured via self-reports or simple survey items but are stated directly in the form of a purchase decision, for instance. Typically the design objectives of a choice experiment include the construction of choice tasks that resemble real decision making contexts. This means, choice experiments reflect the social context dependence of behavioral decisions by activating similar cognitions as those that are relevant in everyday life situations and their respective contexts. Further, discrete choice experiments can be complemented by a classical survey which collects discriminatory attitudes and other relevant variables. This allows for empirical tests of attitude-behavior correlations. We used this method in order to detect whether the preference for orange juice

¹ The three studies we will present here, all use the specific case of anti-Semitism to illustrate the main points (see also Beyer and Krumpal, 2010 and Beyer and Liebe, 2013 where the first two datasets are directly applied to anti-Semitism research). This is due to the fact that it can be considered one of the most "sensitive topics" in Germany where all of the research for this paper took place. Also the theoretical debates which specify the circumstances under which SDB decreases seem most advanced in the field of anti-Semitism research compared to other fields of prejudice research; at least in one important aspect: the impact of *communication latency* (Bergmann and Erb, 1986).

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