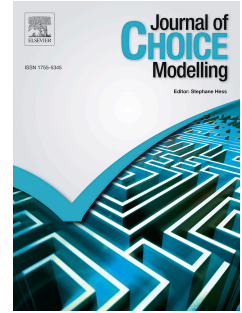


# Accepted Manuscript

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PII: S1755-5345(17)30089-1

DOI: [10.1016/j.jocm.2018.06.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jocm.2018.06.001)

Reference: JOCM 147

To appear in: *Journal of Choice Modelling*

Received Date: 30 May 2017

Revised Date: 20 April 2018

Accepted Date: 4 June 2018

Please cite this article as: Zawojcka, E., Mahieu, P.-A., Crastes, R., Louviere, J., Mitigating strategic misrepresentation of values in open-ended stated preference surveys using negative reinforcement, *Journal of Choice Modelling* (2018), doi: 10.1016/j.jocm.2018.06.001.

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## Mitigating strategic misrepresentation of values in open-ended stated preference surveys using negative reinforcement

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and Jordan Louviere<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract:** Open-ended questions are used in stated preference surveys to elicit values that individuals assign to goods and services. In some settings, the open-ended format can tempt respondents to strategically misrepresent these values and, hence, it may lead to biased welfare measures. Literature has developed several methods, such as an oath or a cheap talk, to encourage truthful disclosure of preferences. These methods rely primarily on positive reinforcement by invoking positive associations of trust, honour and honesty, among others. In this paper, we propose a new approach that seeks to mitigate strategic misrepresentation of preferences by means of negative reinforcement, which arouses negative associations, for example, with mistrust and insincerity. The proposed negative reinforcement approach involves punishment for dishonesty in the form of unfavourable recoding of stated values if those are suspected of being untruthful. The approach is examined in a field survey concerning valuation of an entertainment event in the Plant Garden in Nantes, France. The survey makes value overstatement potentially attractive. We find that respondents who are aware of subsequent unfavourable recoding of insincere (i.e., overstated) values to zeros state significantly lower willingness-to-pay values than respondents who are not faced with the possible recoding of their answers. The effectiveness of the proposed negative reinforcement approach in reducing value overstatement is assessed against an existing positive reinforcement approach, namely against the oath approach. Both approaches are observed to generate statistically equivalent value estimates, pointing to their similar effectiveness in mitigating overstatement incentives.

**Keywords:** stated preferences; open-ended value elicitation; strategic overstatement; negative reinforcement; recoding of insincere responses

**JEL codes:** D61, H40

**Declarations of interest:** None

We gratefully thank the anonymous reviewers whose valuable comments helped us improve the paper considerably. Ewa Zawojska acknowledges the support of the National Science Centre in Poland (Preludium 8, grant no. 2014/15/N/HS4/01328; Etiuda 4, grant no. 2016/20/T/HS4/00013).

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