



Research Review

A meta-analytic synthesis of the question–behavior effect ☆

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Abstract

Asking people a question about performing a target behavior influences future performance of that behavior. While contextually robust and methodologically simple, this “question–behavior effect” reveals theoretical complexity as evidenced by the large number of proposed explanations for the effect. Furthermore, considerable heterogeneity exists regarding the “question” used to elicit the effect and the variety of different types of target “behaviors” for which the effect has manifested. A meta-analytic synthesis of 104 question-behavior studies across 51 published and unpublished papers is presented. Grouping proposed theories for the effect into four overarching categories, we derive and test systematic predictions regarding potential moderators of conceptual and practical significance. Our findings provide varying degrees of support for four different theoretical mechanisms (attitudes, consistency, fluency and motivations) proposed to underlie the effect. Insights into these mechanisms are presented and outstanding gaps in our understanding are identified as opportunities for future research.

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“There is nothing so theoretical as a good method.”
(Greenwald, 2012).

This quote is the title of an article in which Greenwald (2012) documents the near-impossibility of establishing superiority of one among competing theoretical interpretations of a novel, interesting, and empirically well-established phenomenon. One such simple effect was introduced to psychology by Sherman (1980) as “the self-erasing nature of errors of prediction.” The effect is seemingly straightforward: Question a person about his or her behavior regarding a target action and the likelihood of performing the behavior in the future changes significantly. Much early work was conducted under either the label of self-prophecy (Greenwald, Klinger, Vande Kamp, & Kerr, 1988) or mere-measurement (Morwitz, Johnson, & Schmittlein, 1993). Methodological similarities prompted scholars from both streams to join the taxonomically separate areas under an overarching paradigm now referred to as the “question–behavior effect” (Spratt et al., 2006).

The question–behavior effect has been demonstrated for a variety of behaviors including: registering to vote and voting in elections (Gerber & Green, 2005a, 2005b; Greenwald, Carnot, Beach, & Young, 1987); influencing consumer purchases (Morwitz et al., 1993); reducing cheating in college (Spangenberg & Obermiller, 1996); impacting risky behaviors among adolescents (Fitzsimons & Moore, 2008); increasing exercise and other health-related behaviors (e.g.,

Spangenberg, 1997; Sandberg & Conner, 2009); increasing recycling (Spratt, Spangenberg, & Perkins, 1999); reducing implicit gender stereotyping (Spangenberg & Greenwald, 1999); and helping a charity (Liu & Aaker, 2008). Far from exhaustive, this list gives one a sense of the practical import of question–behavior-based interventions. However, a synthesis of conditions under which the effect consistently manifests is lacking. Thus, one aim of our work is to identify effective means and contexts within which the technique can be applied.

Although the robustness and practical importance of the effect is evident, its theoretical underpinnings remain a matter of some debate. Much of this debate stems from the sheer number of theories proposed for the effect. For such a relatively simple influence technique, researchers have suggested a remarkable quantity and diversity of explanations (Dholakia, 2010; Spratt et al., 2006), with relatively few having been tested and very few given the attention of more than a single study. Further, most existing support comes from theoretically relevant boundary conditions, rather than direct mediational process evidence. Theoretical uncertainty for such an operationally clear-cut effect may be unsurprising, especially to those who have wrestled with similarly “simple” effects, finding them more complex than initially expected (e.g., halo effect; Thorndike, 1920). While several question–behavior studies contain information critical to our understanding, many fail to inform with regard to its theoretical

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