

Qualifications to Generalized Absolutes: "Approval of Hitting" Questions on the GSS

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IN answering survey questions, people do not always mean what they say. Between God's and the respondent's truth and the actual responses given to survey queries there is all too frequently a wide gap. This problem of measurement error is widely recognized and frequently investigated (e.g., Sudman and Bradburn, 1974; Dalenius, 1977). Unfortunately, such measurement error is a difficult contaminant to detect, isolate, and exorcise since it is hard to measure errors that originate from measurement. Because of this inherent difficulty, the problem is not simple to handle and, partly as a result of this, it is often wishfully ignored. In this paper, we discuss a particular case in which people did not mean what they said, or, to put the emphasis slightly differently, people meant something different from what the survey researcher might have suspected.

On the 1976 and 1978 General Social Surveys, respondents were asked a series of questions about approval of hitting by police and by private citizens. Respondents were first asked if they would approve of hitting in "any situations you can imagine," and then asked subsequent subquestions concerning approval in particular situations. (See Appendix for exact wording of questions.) This format allows us to examine how people who disapproved of hitting as a generalized absolute responded to the subquestions on situational hitting.

Abstract An analysis of "approval of hitting" questions on the General Social Surveys finds evidence of correlated error. Respondents frequently ignore the absolute phrasing of questions. As a result, they often contradict themselves by approving of specific uses of hitting after having rejected any use of such force. These contradictors tend to have lower education and less support for punitive responses on other items.

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It would seem that if respondents said "no" to the possibility of "any situation you can imagine" in which hitting was approved, they should say "no" to each of the specific situations. However, when we cross-tabulate the general and the situational questions, we find that the vast majority of disapprovers on the general questions actually approved of hitting on one or more of the situational questions. On police hitting, 86 percent of those who disapproved of hitting on the general question approved of hitting in one or more of the four specific situations. On average, they approved of 1.52 specific situations. On man hitting, 83.7 percent of the absolute disapprovers approved of hitting in one or more of the five situations and they averaged 1.82 approvals.

These results suggest that many respondents are not taking the general questions literally. Rather than responding to the absolute phrase "are there any situations you can imagine," many respondents are answering the question as if it were "in most situations you can think of" or "in general."¹ This pattern is illustrated by a Guttman scaling experiment. When we ran the general and four situational police items in a Guttman scale and allowed SPSS to order the items according to the best Guttman fit, the general item did not appear as the hardest item (i.e., the item for which it was most difficult to say "no") but appeared as the middle item in the scale. Likewise, on adult male hitting it was the fourth hardest of the six items. This is, of course, just where we would expect a middling question on "in general" or "more often than not" to appear compared to situational questions with more or less difficult reasons for approval.

This divergence between what the general questions ask and what many people are answering may come from a literal failure of imagination. When asked about "any situation you can imagine," many people simply may not think of a situation where they would approve of hitting. When presented with a specific situation that is widely regarded as a legitimate use of hitting (e.g., self-defense), they indicate approval, thereby contradicting their response to the general

¹ Of course, not all cases having a "no" to the general question and a "yes" to a specific question indicate a respondent did not mean his "no" response. It is possible that the respondent did not mean what he said on the specific situation rather than the general question. This is undoubtedly true in some cases, but we doubt that this is the common pattern. In a majority of cases a respondent contradicts his general response on two or more specific situations. It is unlikely that the respondent managed to contradict himself twice without meaning to. In addition, the level of "don't knows" indicates that respondents have greater difficulty with the general questions rather than the specific. Finally, there are, of course, a number of random transference errors, but these should be minuscule. In sum, we expect the majority of contradictions to represent cases where the respondent's response to the general question did not accurately reflect his true attitude.

question. It may also be that many people are not "test trained" to recognize the general question as an absolute and that the adjective "any" almost demands a "yes" response (Payne, 1951).²

In order to try to understand these contradictions further, we examined how the response pattern to the general questions was related to the situational questions and other relevant questions. We did not want to examine what attributes were associated with greater or lesser approval of violence (on this substantive question, see Loftin and Lizotte, 1974; Smith et al., 1978; Curry, 1979; DeFronzo, 1979; and Sengstock, 1978), but rather what factors were associated with contradictions (a measurement error question).

To examine difference between contradictors and noncontradictors, we formulated specific hypotheses and also inspected the profiles of these groups. We hypothesized first that the contradictors might be of lower education/intelligence, which would lead them to misunderstand the general questions, have less cognitive versatility and thus be less able to imagine a sufficient range of situations, and/or be less "test-wise." We checked this by using years of schooling, verbal ability measured on a 10-item word identification test, and interviewer's evaluation of respondent's comprehension. Next, we thought that contradictors might be more opposed to the police and the judicial system and thus more likely (on the police hitting item) to say "no" as part of a generalized repudiation of the police. Questions on capital punishment, the severity of courts, spending for law enforcement, and political ideology were used for this. Third, we thought that one's own experience with and response to violence might make one take an absolute negative position on the general man hitting question (and perhaps on police hitting). This was tapped by items on experiencing violence by hand and firearms. When faced with specific situations that could be judged on their individual merits rather than as a response to police or violence in general, the disapprovers would contradict their general response. Fourth, we checked to see if contradictors had a general tendency to give ambivalent answers or uncrystallized opinions by using a scale measuring propensity to say "don't know" to 11 attitude items and a second scale measuring propensity to say "don't know" to the three crime attitudes used above. Finally, we included sex and race, since previous research (e.g., Stinchcombe et al., 1980, and Smith, 1976) has shown that both variables are strongly related to attitudes associated with violence.

² The evidence is strong, on the other hand, that those who reply "yes" did mean that. Only .011 of those replying "yes" to the general police hitting question failed to approve of a specific situation and only .024 of those replying "yes" to the general man hitting question failed to approve of a specific situation. Moreover, even these small groups are not being contradictory, since the situational questions are finite and obviously do not cover all possible situations.

To disentangle the difference that came from the lower approval rate of contradictors for hitting from that which came from their status as contradictors, we controlled for specific instances of approval.³ With these controls we found that contradictors have significantly less education, verbal achievement, and lower comprehension, are less in favor of punitive justice, and are more likely to be female and nonwhite. Moreover, the strength of the associations tends to increase as one moves from approval of a few situations to approval of many situations. On education, for example, the association increases from $\gamma = .289$ for one situation to $\gamma = .683$ when four situations are approved. Thus, as the contradictions become more pronounced, these variables tend to become better predictors. Man hitting shows the same associations between lower education/achievement and contradictions, but none of the other variables show significant differences. On these variables, there is also a tendency for the associations to increase with the degree of contradiction, but the pattern is not as clear or strong as on police hitting.

Giving contradictory responses to the police and man hitting questions stems partly from low education and achievement. Contradictors tend to misjudge the import of the general questions, perhaps through a literal failure of imagination or by not recognizing the absolute nature of the question. On police hitting, contradictions are also related to a nonpunitive position on crime and punishment. These people tend to say "no" to approval of police hitting because of their general nonpunitive position on justice or distrust of the police. When faced with reasonable instances of police force in the situational questions, they contradict their general nonapproval. The greater contradictions of women and blacks reflect somewhat similar general perspectives, an antiviolence tendency among women, and a similar tendency coupled with less support for the police among blacks. The hypotheses about experiences with personal violence and approval of violence and DKs fail to find support in these data.

The increasing associations between these variables and the degree of contradiction result from the fact that a single contradiction may result from various reasons, or even at random, but the greater the number of contradictions, the more likely it is that one of these factors has been exerting an influence. In sum, contradiction errors on the hitting questions result from several specific causes and do not simply represent random error.

This situation has several implications for the design and analysis of surveys. First, it questions reliance on single indicators. Use of the one-item general indicators to measure attitudes toward hitting mis-

³ Details available from author.

represents the distribution of attitudes on hitting and oversimplifies any analysis of the use of violence. Second, we are cautioned about using general or absolute questions as filters or screeners. The assumption that people filtered out have a known response pattern to the subquestions is shown to be highly questionable. Third, people do not respond well to hypothetical and/or abstract questions. They are less able to grasp the points at issue and more likely to respond to the matter in an irrelevant frame of reference. Likewise, questions with an "absolute" perspective similar to that used in these items are apparently answered by many people from a nonabsolute perspective, and perhaps they should therefore be avoided.⁴ Fourth, it challenges models of measurement error that assume uncorrelated error (e.g., Heise, 1970). In this instance, error comes from specific causes, and these errors would probably correlate across time, thereby affecting attempts to measure error through test/retest administrations (Smith and Stephenson, 1979). The correlated nature of measurement error complicates its calculation and undermines the assumption that the measurement error attenuates relationships because it adds random noise.

To minimize this problem, survey researchers will have to be more careful and elaborate in the construction of questions and more probing in their analysis. Single items can serve useful purposes, but for a more complete and refined understanding of attitudes, one needs either a battery of scalable items, a format that measures multidimensions of a question such as George Gallup's quintamensonal design, and/or some internal checks such as interitem reliability or syllogistic questions. With these refinements, we will be better able to tell whether a respondent really meant what he or she said:

Appendix: Exact Wording of Questions

55. Are there any situations you can imagine in which you would approve of a policeman striking an adult male citizen? YES, NO, NOT SURE
 Would you approve if the citizen . . .
- | | | | |
|--|------|-----|----------|
| A. had said vulgar and obscene things to a policeman? | YES, | NO, | NOT SURE |
| B. was being questioned as a suspect in a murder case? | YES, | NO, | NOT SURE |
| C. was attempting to escape from custody? | YES, | NO, | NOT SURE |
| D. was attacking the policeman with his fists? | YES, | NO, | NOT SURE |

⁴ As in the literature showing support for democratic absolutes but opposition to specific applications (McCloskey, 1964; Prothro and Grigg, 1960; Bennett, 1975). See also Schuman and Harding, 1964:364-65.

56. Are there any situations that you can imagine in which you would approve of a man punching an adult male stranger? Would you approve if the stranger . . .
- | | | | |
|---|------|-----|----------|
| A. was in a protest march showing opposition to the other man's views? | YES, | NO, | NOT SURE |
| B. was drunk and bumped into the man and his wife on the street? | YES, | NO, | NOT SURE |
| C. had hit the man's child after the child accidentally damaged the stranger's car? | YES, | NO, | NOT SURE |
| D. was beating up a woman and the man saw it? | YES, | NO, | NOT SURE |
| E. had broken into the man's house? | YES, | NO, | NOT SURE |

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