CONTRADICTIONS ON THE ABORTION SCALE

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Social scientists widely acknowledge that most survey questions are contaminated with a significant amount of measurement error. Numerous studies document various types of errors from response set to nonresponse bias (Sudman and Bradburn, 1974), but measurement error is hard to identify and deal with since it originates from the act of measurement. In this paper, we examine a particular case where respondents gave logically contradictory responses on a scale of items. We investigate the causes of these contradictions, consider their impact, and discuss the implications for survey research in general.

The General Social Survey (National Opionion Research Center) contains an abortion item that opens with "Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a <u>legal</u> abortion if..." This is followed by six situational subparts...

A. If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?

B. If she is married and does not want any more children?

C. If the woman's own health is seriously endangered

by the pregnancy?

D. If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more childeren?

E. If she became pregnant as a result of rape?

F. If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?

In 1977, 1978, and 1980 a seventh absolute question was added, "G. The woman wants it for any reason?"

Following up on our research on contradictions between the general and specific approval of hitting questions (Smith, 1981b), we looked at people who said "yes" to the general item but "no" or "don't know" to one or more specific abortion items. 83% were consistent, giving "yes" to all of the situational questions, 2.2% gave one or more "DK's" while replying "yes" to the global question, and 14.9% gave one or more "no." If we exclude all "DK's" we find that 14.4% contradicted their global approval with one or more disapprovals to situational questions. This is considerably less than the 84 - 86% who contradicted themselves on the two approval of hitting scales.[1] The lower level of contradiction may be due to: 1)the greater salience and importance of abortion, and 2)the placement of the general

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[1]If we consider what percent of all respondents were contradictors the difference is reduced but still substantial. On abortion 5.7% were contradictors and on the hitting scales 17 - 26% were contradictors.

question after rather than before the situational questions.

Even though substantially lower, it is upsetting that 14.4% of those approving of abortions "for any reason," could give this response after explicitly rejecting approval in one or more situational questions (mean 1.92 disapprovals). We suspect that most contradictors failed to interpret the item as a general absolute.[1] They may not have noticed the absolute phrasing or may not have realized that any negative response to the six situational questions logically demanded a "no" response to the general question. Such error might come from a lack of a full understanding of the questions, inattention, or other cognitive deficiencies (Nunnally and Husek, 1958).

Alternatively, research by Schuman and Presser (1981) on part-whole context effects found that when a specific abortion item on birth defects preceded a general abortion item support for the general item was lower. People apparently tend to exclude the specific item from their deliberation about the general item. As they note:

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[1]Transference errors - miscodes, misentries, etc. undoubtedly account for some contradictions but not an appreciable amount. Consider the two possible errors 1)global response miscoded as "yes," should be "no," and 2) one or more situational responses coded as "no" should be "yes." The first is unlikely since the situational responses are distinctly more approving than the situational responses among those actually coded "no" for the global item. Likewise, the situational items are not random miscodes since few contradictions involve one of the hard abortion items (defect, health, rape) rather than the "soft" items (poverty, enough children, unwilling to wed). There were 392 contradictions involving soft reasons and only 70 with hard items.

> When the more general item is asked first, some respondents may say yes but mainly with a possible defective child in mind. When the item on abortion because of a defective child is asked first, however this indicates to respondents that the general item which follows does not refer to such a specific reason. Thus respondents who are generally reluctant to favor abortion except within narrow limits should find it easier to disagree to the general item after agreeing to the more specific item on a defective child.

In our case some respondents may in effect be deducting each of the specific, situational questions from the general question. They thus would be redefining the global questions to read: "Are there any other reasons a woman should be able to have a legal abortion?" Thinking of other good reasons (incest, too young, emotional distress) they reply positively to the global question. Of course, respondents may mishear or misinterpret the global questions as referring to "any other" reason without being influenced by this part-whole effect.

Finally, respondents may be consciously contradicting themselves. A person may generally be in favor of abortion but not approve of it in a particular circumstance. When faced with the final global item they may select this response conscious that it contradicts their earlier exception because they want to indicate their general support for abortion. Logical contradiction may not be as important to them as trying to establish securely their pro-abortion stance.

In Table 1 we looked at various possible determinants of contradictions. Years of schooling, verbal ability

(WORDSUM), and interviewer rating of respondent comprehension (COMPREND) were measures of cognitive ability. Race was included to capture special communication difficulties because of lower quality schooling, use of black or ghetto English, and other cultural differences. Voting and item nonresponse (DK's) were used to measure participation and interest in the civic culture, and public issues. A feminism scale was used to measure general attitude toward "women issues." Finally, religion was employed since it has one of the strongest associations to substantive differences in abortion attitudes.

Abortion attitudes are divided into four types: 1)disapprovers - opposing the global item and one or more of the six situational items (mean approvals on situational items = 2.7), 2)contradictors - approving of the global item and opposing one or more situational items (mean = 4.1), 3)partial approvers - opposing the global item and approving of all situational items, (mean = 6.0), and 4)complete approvers - approving of all items (mean = 6.0).

TABLE 1

ABORTION APPROVAL BY SELECT DETERMINANTS

	EDUC	WORDSUM	COMPREND	RACE	VOTE76	DKs	FEMIN	REL
Disapprovers (ABANY=no; one or more disapprovals on six situations)	11.4	5.8	1.72	.87	.57	.82	2.51	.
Contradictors (ABANY=yes; one or more disapprovals on six situations)	11.3	4.9	1.69	.68	.43	.82	2.76	.2
Partial Approvers (ABANY=no ; approval of all six situations)	12.3	6.0	1.80	.94	.62	.90	2.97	.1
Complete Approvers (ABANY=yes; approval of all six situations)	13.1	6.8	1.85	.90	.62	.88	3.18	.1

EDUC = years of schooling
WORDSUM = score on ten item vocabulary test
COMPREND = proportion rated as
RACE = proportion white
VOTE76 = proportion voting
DKs = proportion no "DK's" to five attitude items
FEMIN = score on four feminism items (FEPOL, FEHOME, FEWORK, FEPRES) 1 = anti-feminism, 4 = pro-feminism
RELIG = proportion Catholic

Table 1 shows that contradictors stand out in several regards. First, they uniformly rank lowest on each measure of cognitive ability. Second, they have the lowest levels of public involvement and interest. Third, they include slightly more Catholics and considerably more blacks. Only on feminism are they not at an extreme.

The differences tend to be greatest between the contradictors ~~and complete~~ and complete approvers: these groups both expressed approval of the absolute item, but

that similarity is about all they share. Clearly, the contradictors are not complete approvers who merely misexpressed their pro-abortion stance (or had it misrecorded) on one or more of the situation items. The difference between contradictors and disapprovers (with whom they share disapproval on one or more specific item) tends to be much smaller. Some of the similarity results from the confounding of determinants of contradiction and determinants of disapproval.[1] To control for the latter fact we standardized for level of abortion approval (based on the six situational items). In all but two cases this increased the differences between contradictors and disapprovers. For example, the education difference of -0.1 years between contradictors and disapprovers (11.3 - 11.4 = -0.1) increased to -0.4 years when level of approval was controlled. The other changes were: WORDSUM: -0.9 to -1.1, COMPREND: -.03 to -.08, RACE: -.09 to -.11, DKs: -.002 to -.050, and RELIGION: .007 to .027. VOTING declined slightly -.142 to -.135 while still remaining pronounced. Only feminism declined notably (.015 to .005).

Overall the profile of contradictors lends support for the cognitive difficiency explanation. They tend to be less educated, verbally unskilled, and relatively uncomprehend-

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[1]There are literally dozens of studies of support and opposition to abortion. Among the more recent are Curry,1980; Ebaugh and Allen, 1980; and Evers and McGee, 1980.

ing. They are uninvolved in the civic culture while coming from a linguistically and socially distinctive culture (blacks.)[1] No direct evidence appears for the part-whole hypothesis but the fact that Schuman and Presser found no education interaction while one appears in this case suggests it may not be a prominant cause here.

We thought that the intentional contradiction hypothesis might be hinted at by the feminism scale. We perhaps found such a hint in the slightly greater feminism of contradictors than disapprovers (which also appears on an ERA item) but it is too small to be accepted as reliable. The profile of contradictors also suggests that most contradictions result from an errant response to the global question. The over representation of Catholics among the contradictors strongly supports the conclusion that they are not really complete approvers and on all variables contradictors more closely resemble disapprovers than complete approvers.

In sum, we found that contradictors are mostly moderate disapprovers of abortion. Their approval of abortion for "any reason" is mostly an errant response that results from a misunderstanding either of the absolute nature of the question or an inability to graspe the logical connection between the situational and global items. In addition some contradictions may be conscious and strategic but evidence

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[1] The race difference remains when the cognitive variables are controlled for.

for this is slight.

The examination of the abortion contradictors reinforces conclusions drawn from research on the more numerous hitting contradictors. First, many people answer an absolute question from a nonabsolute perspective. This is probably more common when the absolute comes first (as in the hitting question) rather than when it follows situational questions (as in abortion). Second, measurement error is often correlated (e.g. with education or low civic interest) rather than random. Because of this we can not assume that this measurement error merely attenuates correlations. The measurement error might be even more concentrated among responses to specific levels of interest, information, importance, etc. toward abortion. These items might identify more contradictions or other types of measurement error such as more people with hidden nonattitudes (Smith, 1981a).

The contradiction example is a small example of measurement error. One might even argue that it is trivial. Yet we know that contradiction can be much more common (as in the hitting questions) and that it is not the only type of error that exists with this scale. Schuman and Presser have demonstrated a context effect and one might speculate about possible response sets, nonresponse biases, and other irregularities and errors. None of these errors and artifacts are easy to detect. Experimental split ballots, multidememsional designs,open ended probing, test-retest measurements, and other techniques are usually needed to help

sift out the measurment error and since each additional measurement creates some additional error we never achieve perfect truth. While burdersome, these efforts are appropriate given the problem. Only by vigorously studying measurement error can we reliably study anything else.

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