Children and Abortions: An Experiment in Question Order

By

Tom W. Smith

National Opinion Research Center
University of Chicago

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For most people attitudes are not finished products sitting on some appropriately labeled mental shelf. To a greater or lesser extent attitudes are custom collages created from personal experience, conversations with friends, news commentaries, and other bits of memory. When asked a survey question people attempt to scan and integrate these scattered and diverse mental images and come up with an opinion on the issue at hand. While primarily shaped by pre-existing memories and leanings, expressed opinion can also be influenced by factors associated with the interview itself. Recent research (Schuman and Presser, 1981; Smith, 1982; Bishop, et al., 1982) has shown that question order is one survey trait that can significantly alter the expression of opinion. Question order can influence responses to questions in several distinct ways. Sometimes, as in rapport and fatigue effects, the mere number of prior questions can influence responses to subsequent items. In other instances the juxtaposition of two questions might make obvious a normative constraint that is not as readily apparent when asked separately. As Schuman and Presser have demonstrated, asking about an American reporter covering the Soviet Union first substantially increases support for allowing a Communists reporter to work in America. The two questions together (and even when separated by some intervening questions - Schuman, Kalton, and Ludwig, 1983) emphasizes a norm of reciprocity that significantly constrains responses between these questions.

One of the more common ways that question order influences expressed opinion is through a focus effect. The prior questions draw attention to some topic that relates to the following question. When a person searches his memory to answer the subsequent question, the images evoked by the previous question come readily to mind. Being more prominant in one's thoughts than they would have been if not made salient by the prior question, these images

lead some individuals to change positions and alter the distribution among the
sample as a whole.

A likely candidate for a focus effect appeared to have occurred on the
1978 General Social Survey. In that year the seven-part question on approval
of legal abortions was preceded by two questions dealing with children.
Immediately preceding the abortion question was an item on the ideal number of
children for a family and this was preceded by a question asking people to
rank the desirability of 17 values for children (see Appendix: Question
Wordings). These questions take several minutes to administer and presumably
would place thoughts about children at the top of the respondent's mind. In
turn, when the respondent considers the subsequent abortion items it seems
likely that thoughts about children will be more prominant among one's mental
images and that support for abortion will be diminished as a result. To test
for this effect we compared the distributions in 1978 with the GSSs that
immediately preceded and followed the 1978 survey (1977 and 1980, respec-
tively) and which did not have the child questions appearing in front of the
abortion items.

Table 1A indicates that in 1978 support for abortion for the four
social reasons (no more children wanted, unable to afford, does not want to
marry, any reason) was down from 5.3 to 7.3 percentage points, averaging 5.9
percentage points with Don't Knows included and 6.5 percentage points with the
Don't Knows excluded. The three strong reasons for abortion (birth defect,
mother's health endangered, and pregnancy due to rape) showed no impact from
the child items, averaging 0.5 percentage points lower with Don't Knows
included and 0.8 percentage points with them excluded. This differential
impact probably occurs because focusing on children is not sufficient to alter
the very high consensus (81-88 percent) that exists for these strong

reasons. Even a heighten focus on children is not enough to reduce support
for abortion in these instances since there is overwhelming consensus that in
these situations the rights of the unborn child are secondary to that of the
woman. On the four social items support is much more evenly divided (38-51
percent approving of legal abortions) and references to children apparently
are able to tip the balance for a significant number of people.

Despite the plausibility of this explanation for the 1978 dip in
support for social abortions, we can not rule out other causes such as
temporary shifts in the true distribution of abortion attitudes. To try to
verify this proportive question order effect, a split ballot question order
experiment was designed for the 1983 GSS. A random half of the sample was
asked the abortion questions with the two child questions immediately pre-
ceding, while the other random half had the child questions appear immediately
after the abortion items. Table 1B shows only weak support for the hypothe-
sized question order effect. On each of the four social items support for
abortion was lower on the child first form, but the effect was much smaller
than in the 1978/1977, 1980 comparisons and did not approach statistical
significance. Support was lowered by an average of only 1.8 percent with
Don't Knows included and 2.2 percent with them excluded. In both cases the
effect was only about one-third the magnitude of the 1978/1977, 1980
difference.

Taking a conservative approach we would accept the null hypothesis
that abortion attitudes did not vary by context. Yet there is some evidence
that the context effect may be real. In the 1983 the differences on the
strong reasons were slightly larger than in the earlier comparison (averaging
+1.6 percent vs. -0.8 percent with Don't Knows excluded) and they are in the
positive direction (i.e., support for abortions for strong reasons was

slightly higher on the form with the child questions first). This could be interpretated to mean that because of sampling variation the child first sample slightly oversample pro-abortion respondents compared to the other form. If we standardized forms according to the distribution of the strong abortion items, we find that the average effect on social abortions increase to between 2.6 percent (don't knows included) and 3.3 percent points (Don't Knows included). Yet even these differences are not statistically significant (generally probabilities of .1 - .4).

A second indicator that the context explanation might be correct comes from a similarity between conditional order effects in 1978/77, 1980 and 1983. In the nonexperimental comparison the magnitude of the differences varied by number of children. Childless respondents averaged 5.7 percent points lower in 1978 on the four social abortion reasons. For 1, 2, and 3+ children the differences were -12.5 percent points, -7.3 percent points, and -3.5 percent points. The 1983 experimental data showed a similar (but not identical pattern), -0.4 percent points for no children, -6.7 percent points for 1, -7.4 percent points for 2, and +1.0 percent points for 3+. We interpret this pattern to mean that raising the salience of children is less for childless respondents because some portion of these respondents are people who do not value children highly and for whom thoughts about children are not a strong suppressor of pro-abortion attitudes. At the opposite end, those with three or more children are seen as being the most aware of children so that the child questions do no notably heighten their naturally high levels of child awareness. It is among those with small families for whom the children questions are most likely both to represent a powerful positive symbol (and therefore anti-abortion) and to notably increase the background level of thoughts about children.

If we accept the question order effect as real we might wonder why it was appreciably greater in 1978 than in 1983. One possibility is apparent in the marginals in Table 1A and 1B. Support for abortion is down significantly in 1983. (This change occurred between 1982 and 1983.) The decline was much greater when the children questions appreared later (averaging -6.7 percentage points for the four social reasons) than when the children questions appeared first (averaging -2.5 percentage points). In one sense this does nothing more than state obliquely what we stated directly earlier, that the context effect was much smaller in 1983 that in the non-experimental condition. But it also suggests a possible reason for the reduced effect. If we assume that true change reduced support for abortion in 1983 then the context effect might also be reduced since some of the people who would have already been moved there by the true change. This suppression effect would be especially likely if the true changed was caused by or operating through an increase in salience of children. A review of news coverage of abortion both during the field period (late February through mid-April, 1983) and since the last GSS in 1982 revealed several pressures against abortion including (1) the reinteration of the Catholics church's anti-abortion stance in the new canon law and in numerous speeches by Pope John Paul II, (2) repeated statements by President Reagan against abortions, and (3) continuing action in the Senate on constitutional amendments to either outlaw abortions or turn authority over to the states. In addition the "Baby Doe" stories have heightened concern on infant rights and infantcide. Yet it is difficult to see any or all of these factors as clearly leading to a reversal of approval for abortions.

There is however one example when a historical shift in attitudes did appreciably change the magnitude of a question order effect. In 1948 asking about allowing an American reporter in the Soviet Union first increased

acceptance of a Communist reporter in America by 37 percent points (Schuman and Presser, 1981). In 1980 the same context experiment produced a 20 percent point shift. This decline of 17 percent points occurred almost entirely because approval of a Communist reporter in America increased by 18 percent points when it was asked first. The context effect was significantly reduced because question order-free approval of Communist reporters (and the Soviet Union in general) increased significantly from 1948 to 1980.

While the 1983 experiment fails to confirm a context effect whereby the presence of prior items focusing on children reduces approval of abortions, there is some reason for believing that such an effect may exist. The effect may have been reduced in 1983 because of the decline in approval of abortion or the non-experimental comparisons in 1978/1977, 1980 may have exaggerated the suspected context effect by attributing to question order changes that were in part due to true change. If the magnitude of the context effect has varied because of true shifts in abortion approval, it may be impossible to adequately duplicate the non-experimental situation. A replication of the 1983 question order experiment would help to determine whether a modest context effect does exist. Until further evidence is accumulated, the children/abortion question order effect is uncertain.

Table 1

Abortion Attitudes by Question Order
(Percent Approving of Abortion, Don't Knows Included)

Abortion Attitudes	Children later	Children First	First-Later	Probability
A. 1977-1980 Surveys				
Birth defect (ABDEFECT)	81.9	80.3	-1.6	.036
No more children (ABNOMORE)	44.9	39.1	-5.8	.000
Mother's health endangered (ABHLTH)	88.2	88.5	+0.3	.954
Can't afford (ABPOOR)	50.8	45.5	-5.3	.004
Woman raped (ABRAPE)	80.6	80.7	+0.1	.534
Woman doesn't want to				
marry (ABSINGLE)	47.0	39.7	-7.3	.000
Any reason (ABANY)	38.0	32.4	-5.6	.002
B. 1983 Experiment				
Birth Defect (ABDEFECT)	75.4	77.0	+1.6	.722
No more children (ABNOMORE)	39.2	36.3	-2.9	.410
Mother's health endangered (ABHLTH)	86.7	87.3	+0.6	.823
Can't afford (ABPOOR)	42.7	41.2	-1.5	.575
Woman raped (ABRAPE)	78.3	80.9	+2.6	.456
Woman doesn't want to				
marry (ABSINGLE)	38.6	36.4	-2.2	.479
Any reason (ABANY)	33.4	32.9	-0.5	.321

APPENDIX: Question Wordings

Now to a different subject.

66.   A.   Which three qualities listed on this card would you say are the most desirable for a child to have? CIRCLE THREE CODES ONLY IN COLUMN A.

| HAND |
| CARD |
| M |

B.   Which one of these three is sthe most desirable of all? READ THE THREE RESPONDENT CHOSE. CIRCLE ONE CODE ONLY IN COLUMN B.

C.   All of the qualities listed on this card may be desirable, but could you tell me which three you consider least important? CIRCLE THREE CODES ONLY IN COLUMN C.

D.   And which one of these three is least important of all? READ THE THREE RESPONDENT CHOSE. CIRCLE ONE CODE ONLY IN COLUMN D.

1. that he has good manners.

2. that he tries hard to succeed.

3. that he is honest.

4. that he is neat and clean.

5. that he has good sense and sound judgment.

6. that he has self-control

7. that he acts like a boy (she acts like a girl).

8. that he gets along well with other children.

9. that he obeys his parents well.

10. that he is responsible.

11. that he is considerate of others.

12. that he is interested in how and why things happen.

13. that he is a good student.

67.   What do you think is the ideal number of children for a family to have?

NONE.........................00

ONE..........................01

TWO..........................02

THREE........................03

FOUR.........................04

FIVE.........................05

SIX..........................06

SEVEN OR MORE................07

AS MANY AS YOU WANT..........08

DON'T KNOW...................98

68. Please tell me whether or not <u>you</u> think it should be possible for a
pregnant woman to obtain a <u>legal</u> abortion if . . . . READ EACH
STATEMENT, AND CIRCLE ONE CODE FOR EACH.

		YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
A.	If there is a strong change of serious defect in the baby?	1	2	8
B.	If she is married and does not want any more children?	1	2	8
C.	If the women's own health is serious endangered by the pregnancy?	1	2	8
D.	If the family has very low income and cannot afford any?	1	2	8
F.	If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?	1	2	8
G.	The woman wants it for any reason	1	2	8