The psychology of self-report: Cognitive and communicative aspects of data collection

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Draft syllabus; details will change

Final topics and readings for each class are announced on Blackboard as we move along

What is this class about?
Self-reports of behaviors, feelings, attitudes, and preferences are the dominant source of data in the social and behavioral sciences. Unfortunately, these data are only as meaningful as the answers research participants provide. This class addresses the cognitive and communicative processes underlying question answering in research situations. How do participants make sense of the questions asked? What can, and what can they not, report on? How do question wording, question format and question context influence the obtained answers? How can we improve the validity of behavioral reports? What determines the direction and size of context effects in attitude measurement? What are the advantages and disadvantages of different data collection methods? Throughout, the focus is on the underlying psychological processes and their theoretical and methodological implication – as will become apparent, the psychology of self-report is the psychology of language, judgment, and memory in a communicative context. For a preview of the type of issues covered see:


Note that this class is not a class that offers easy prescriptions for questionnaire design – it is a class about the psychology of memory, judgment, and communication and its implications for questionnaires, experiments, and other data collection methods. For practical advice on questionnaire design that is (by and large) compatible with the principles discussed in class I recommend:


Format
Each class consists of an overview lecture, application exercises, and discussion, complemented by readings. Except for the first meeting, a typical class will begin with a discussion of the assigned readings, structured by assignment questions that asked you to apply the readings to specific data collection issues. This is followed by discussions of students’ own related data collection problems. After a break, an overview lecture introduces the next topic and provides a context for the readings and assignments for the next class. This means, for example, that topic #3 below will be introduced in the second half of class 2 and discussed in the first half of class 3, which ends with an introduction of topic
#4. Hence, any given topic below comes up in the second half of one class (lecture) and first half of the next class (discussion & applications). All required readings will be available online.

**Topics and readings**

Unless otherwise marked the required readings are available on Blackboard; so are many (but not all) of the recommended readings.

### #1 How the questions shape the answers: Introduction & thematic overview

The first meeting provides a thematic overview and opportunity to learn about participants’ backgrounds and interests related to self-report issues.


#### A. Making sense of questions

### #2 The logic of conversation in research situations

Research participants bring the tacit assumptions that guide conversations in daily life to the research situation. We review these assumptions, which researchers routinely violate, and their implications for questionnaire design and experimental procedures. The selections by Grice and Sperber & Wilson are key statements of the underlying pragmatic principles; the Schwarz piece applies these principles to social science research methods.

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


B. Asking and answering questions about behavior

Introductory overview of main issues:


#3 Reporting on one’s behavior: Autobiographical memory and options to improve recall

Researchers often ask for information that people simply can’t provide (e.g., “On how many days, if any, did you have a headache last year?”, a question from a government health survey). We consider what people may or may not be able to report on and what can be done to make their task more reasonable.

Required:


Recommended:


#4 What I must have done: Reconstruction and estimation in behavioral reports

Given the limits of actual recall, respondents’ are bound to draw on any input that may allow them to arrive at a plausible behavioral report. We consider the nature of these reconstruction and estimation strategies.

Required:


Recommended:


#5 Reporting on feelings: Convergence and divergence in concurrent, retrospective, and prospective reports

Feelings are fleeting and can only be introspected on while one has them. After a short while, they need to be reconstructed on the basis of one’s lay theories. These same theories are also the basis of affective predictions, which usually results in good convergence between expected and remembered feelings – yet, neither may be a good representation of one’s actual experience. Because predicted feelings play a key role in decision making, these convergences and divergences have important implications for many basic social science issues.

Required:


Recommended:


#6 Alternatives to retrospective reports: Diaries and real-time data capture

Memory issues can be attenuated (and sometimes avoided) through real-time or close-in-time data collection. We consider some options, focusing on experience sampling and diaries.

Required:


Recommended:


C. **Asking and answering questions about attitudes**

Introductory overview of main topics:


#7 **Attitudes and opinions: Classic issues and approaches**

We begin with a review of classic attitude concepts, their change over time and its reflection in measurement procedures.

Required:


Recommended:


#8 **Context effects: The conditions of assimilation and contrast**
What determines the direction, size, and generalization of context effects in evaluative judgment? Bless & Schwarz present a comprehensive model that extends beyond context effects in self-report. It may be more psychology than non-psychologists in the class may want and a shorter version, focusing only on key implications for questionnaires, is presented in Chapter 5 of *Thinking about answers*.

**Required:**


Or:


**Recommended:**


### #9 Attitude reports without intention: Implicit measures

Concerns about the context sensitivity of explicit attitude reports motivated attempts to develop more indirect measures, which have collectively become known as “implicit” measures of attitudes. The contributions to the Wittenbrink & Schwarz volume present how-to guides for all major variants, most of which require reaction time measurement. The class provides a short overview and focuses on more low tech variants, which can be more easily integrated into diverse data collection efforts. Unfortunately, the hope that implicit measures bypass context effects was illusory. We address the implications of this finding in the next class.

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


--Comprehensive reference work --
Review and integration

#10 Judgment and memory from the actor’s perspective

Having reviewed the context sensitive processes underlying memory, judgment, and self-report of behaviors and attitudes, you may wonder what the malleability of self-report means: How should we collect data to get at the “real” thing? And how “real” is that “real thing” to begin with? Do people have stable beliefs and preferences? The Schwarz (2012) chapter addresses these issues; large sections of the chapter will be familiar because they cover material from the earlier sections and provide a review of what we’ve done so far in class. Other sections address more controversial issues. The Eagly & Chaiken (2005) reading provides a counter position, defending a dispositional view of attitudes.

Required:


Special issues

The topics below are suggestions; we can pick and add based on students’ interests and needs.

#11 Age-related changes in self-report

Normal human aging is associated with cognitive changes that affect the processes underlying self-report. Despite a rapidly aging population, this is a largely neglected topic. Similarly neglected is the other end of the age spectrum, where relatively little is known about what kids can report on when and under which conditions.

Required:


#12 Cross-national and cross-cultural studies

Cultures differ to some extent in their dominant cognitive and communicative processes. This has implications for self-report, which are often compounded by language issues. The Schwarz et al reading illustrates cultural differences in mental construal, drawing on the tasks discussed earlier in this class. The Harkness et al chapter presents the current state of the art re questionnaire translation and adaptation.

Required:


Recommended:


#13 Guarding against surprises: Cognitive interviewing and improved pretests

Survey researchers developed a variety of procedures that facilitate the identification of questionnaire problems at an early stage.

Required:


Recommended resources:


#14 Crowd sourcing and web surveys

Combining crowd sourcing websites, such as Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, with online data collection (e.g., through Qualtrics) can be a very efficient method of data collection. This class addresses the advantages and disadvantages and reviews practical advice.

Required:


Recommended:
A selection of additional papers is on Blackboard.

Wrap-up

#15 The psychology of self-report: What do we know? What should we know? And what do we do with it?

Final review & discussion

Grading
Grading is based on class participation (50%) and a research proposal (50%) that can address any topic covered in class. The most useful option is usually to apply what you learned in class to your own substantive area of research.
**Academic honesty and integrity**
Students are responsible for honest completion and representation of their work. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one’s own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another’s work as one’s own.

All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *Scampus*, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: [http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/](http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/). Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at [http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/](http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/).

**Sexual harassment**
Immediately bring matters of sexual harassment to the attention of the instructor, department chair, or other university authority.

**Special needs -- students with disabilities**
I will be happy to accommodate any students with special needs. The university requires that students requesting academic accommodations based on a disability are required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

**Changes**
The syllabus and/or course schedule may be modified at my discretion. I will announce and changes in class, via email, or Blackboard.
Appendix: Reference volumes

Below I list some useful reference volumes pertaining to cognitive and communicative aspects of social science measurement. Chapters from some of them were included in the above readings. Where available, I added open access links.

  
  Open access: [http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/64021](http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/64021)

  


  
  Open access: [http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/64020](http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/64020)

  
  Open access: [http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/64018](http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/64018)


Not “cognitive” in orientation, but still worth reading are the following two classics:
