Course Description

Self-reports of behaviors, feelings, attitudes, and preferences are the dominant source of data in all social and behavioral sciences, including consumer behavior, management, and decision research. 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? What does this imply for reports of behaviors? What does it imply for reports of attitudes and preferences? What are the advantages and disadvantages of different data collection methods? For a short preview of the type of issues covered see:


Note that this is not a class that offers easy one-size-fits-all prescriptions for questionnaire design – it is a class about basic processes of communication, memory, and judgment, and their implications for behavioral science data collection, including questionnaires, experiments, diary, and experience sampling studies.

Learning Objectives

- Understand the tasks involved in answering questions about behaviors, attitudes, and preferences from the respondent’s perspective
- Understand the basic communicative and cognitive processes involved in these tasks
- Understand how contextual variables impact these processes and shape the answers collected
- Learn how to handle these complexities in your own research
**Required Materials**

All required materials will be available on Blackboard and/or the USC library.

**Prerequisites and/or Recommended Preparation:**

The class is designed to be accessible for students throughout the behavioral sciences. If you are unfamiliar with basic principles of psychology, the readings will take more time.

**Course Notes:**

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 materials will be available on Blackboard.

**Grading Policies:**

Grading is based on class participation (10%), completion of weekly assignment questions and exercises (40%), and a research proposal (50%) that can address any topic covered in class. The weekly assignment questions and exercises will be posted on Blackboard. The most useful option for the research proposal is to apply what you learned in class to your own substantive area of research. There is no exam. There will be multiple opportunities to discuss your research proposal, complete with peer review and class input (see weeks 11-15). The final version is due on the day of the last class (week 16); please upload to Blackboard.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

**Academic Integrity and Conduct**

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. 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 (plagiarism). Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. All students are expected to understand and abide by the principles discussed in the SCampus, the Student Guidebook (www.usc.edu/scampus or http://scampus.usc.edu). A discussion of plagiarism appears in the University Student Conduct Code (section 11.00 and Appendix A).

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
Failure to adhere to the academic conduct standards set forth by these guidelines and our programs will not be tolerated by the USC Marshall community and can lead to dismissal.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the Office of Equity and Diversity [http://equity.usc.edu/](http://equity.usc.edu/) or to the Department of Public Safety [http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us](http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us). This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. The Center for Women and Men [http://engemannshc.usc.edu/cwm/](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/cwm/) provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage [https://sarc.usc.edu/reporting-options/](https://sarc.usc.edu/reporting-options/) describes reporting options and other resources.

**Support Systems**

**Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call**
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. [https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/](https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/)

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255**
Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. [http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

**Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call**
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. [https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/](https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/)

**Sexual Assault Resource Center**
For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: [http://sarc.usc.edu/](http://sarc.usc.edu/)

**Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX compliance – (213) 740-5086**
Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. [https://equity.usc.edu/](https://equity.usc.edu/)

**Bias Assessment Response and Support**
Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. [https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/](https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/)

**Student Support & Advocacy – (213) 821-4710**
Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. [https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/](https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/)

**Diversity at USC – [https://diversity.usc.edu/](https://diversity.usc.edu/)**
Tabs for Events, Programs and Training, Task Force (including representatives for each school), Chronology, Participate, Resources for Students
COURSE CALENDAR/READINGS/CLASS SESSIONS

All weekly assignment questions and required readings are available on Blackboard and so are many (but not all) of the recommended readings.

Each week you are expected to
- Read the required readings
- Complete the assignment questions and bring your answers to class for discussion. These questions ask you to summarize key concepts from the readings and to apply those concepts to specific tasks, usually by predicting how different questions would affect the answers.
- Each week, the assignment questions will also ask you to consider the implications of the readings for your own ongoing doctoral research.

In class, we will use these questions and your answers to review key implications of the readings. The more you attempt to relate the material to your own research, the more you will get out of class session.

#1  Introduction and overview

The first class provides an overview of topics and an opportunity for introductions. Please be prepared to describe your own current research interests and current studies, so we can take them into account in determining what to emphasize more or less during this semester.

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:


#3 What were participants thinking? Cognitive interviewing and improved pretests

Given the complexities of language comprehension and communication, it is important to employ development techniques that ensure that most participants understand key questions as intended. This week we review these techniques. The Willis (2005) book is an excellent hands-on summary.

Required:


Recommended:


B. Asking and answering questions about behavior

#4 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:


#5 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:


#6  **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:


#7  **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. The findings often differ from retrospective reports, which raises important conceptual questions about the conditions under which prospective (e.g., how I will feel), concurrent (how I feel now) and retrospective (how I did feel) reports converge or diverge. In most cases, prospective and retrospective reports show good consistency because they are based on the same lay theories, which also drive choice (decision what to do), resulting in good convergence that suggests considerable validity. However, concurrent measures indicate that the actual in-situ experience may be poorly related to prediction as well as memory and that the observed convergence is to a large extent a product of mental construction.
C. Asking and answering questions about attitudes and preferences

#8 Attitudes, opinions, and preferences: Conceptual issues and measurement procedures

We begin with a review of classic attitude concepts, their change over time and reflection in measurement procedures. I recommend you read the required pieces in the order listed.

Required:


Recommended:


### #9 Mental construal: Context effects in evaluative judgment

What determines the emergence, direction, size, and generalization of context effects in evaluative judgment, including attitude reports? Bless & Schwarz present a comprehensive model that extends beyond context effects in self-report. Given its length, it is the only required reading.

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


### #10 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:**


**D. Project reviews & special issues**

**#11-15 Project development and review & special topics**

The topics of weeks 11-15 will be determined based on students’ interests. Some of these weeks will serve the discussion of your own ongoing or planned research projects. You will present your projects, complete with draft materials, which we will peer review, discuss, and improve. In addition, a selection of the topics below will be covered; other topics may be added as needed.

- **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:**


**Recommended:**


- **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 regarding questionnaire translation and adaptation.
Required:


Recommended:


• Crowd sourcing

Many studies are suitable for crowdsourcing, which most often means using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. We review the (quickly changing) options and basic insights in what to pay attention to when using online subject pools.

Required:

Feldman, G. (2016) Running experiments on mechanical Turk
http://mgto.org/running-experiments-with-amazon-mechanical-turk/


Recommended:

Note the linked references in Feldman’s piece above.


MTurk basics
https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/under-the-hood-of-mechanical-turk#.WLbz_fkrl2w

Buhrmeister’s (2016) MTurk Guide
E. Review and integration

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

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 assumes that thinking is for doing and is therefore tuned to goal pursuit in the current context: Stable preferences are the researcher’s fundamental attribution error; actors have much less use for them than assumed. Large sections of this chapter will be familiar because they cover material from the earlier sections and provide a review of what we’ve done in class.

Required: