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IJzendoorn, M.H. van

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ANSWERS WITHOUT QUESTIONS: A NOTE ON RESPONSE STYLE IN QUESTIONNAIRES

MARINUS H. VAN IJZENDOORN¹

University of Leiden, The Netherlands

Summary.—A "questionnaire" without questions was given to 175 first-year students. It is assumed that in such an ambiguous situation, the influence of response style is maximal. The students tended to prefer the more positively formulated or less extreme categories. These response styles, however, did not seem to influence answers to meaningful questions from an attitude scale.

The answers to attitude questionnaires are often influenced by response tendencies. The respondents do not only take the content of the questions into consideration but also the formal aspect of questions and answers. Some subjects systematically prefer the first or last alternative instead of the less extreme categories. Some respondents prefer 'positive' answers, such as 'yes,' 'true,' 'I agree,' etc.; for an overview of response tendencies, see Nederhof (1981).

The influence of response styles seems dependent on the clarity and familiarity of the questions. If the question is extremely unfamiliar, the subjects feel obliged to construct an answer on the spot. They then feel inclined to consider all kinds of (irrelevant) contextual information as an anchor (Van IJzendoorn & Van der Veer, 1984). Vaguely stated questions could elicit the same response tendency. We may assume that sometimes researchers construct questionnaires which make the subjects uncertain about the 'right' answers because the content of the questions is ambiguous or unfamiliar (Dessens & Jansen, 1981). However, questions are seldom devoid of meaning, forcing the respondents to consider only formal aspects of the questionnaire in choosing an answer. This could only happen if the questions are posed in idiosyncratic terminology or refer to topics unfamiliar to the respondents. One would like to know which response styles operate in such an extremely ambiguous setting.

The 'questionnaire' without questions (Berg & Rapaport, 1954) creates such an ambiguous setting. The 'questionnaire' without questions requires subjects to choose among different answers only on the basis of their presentation. By answering to a non-existing question, the respondents are forced to solve a paradoxical problem; they have to make sense of a meaningless situation. In doing so, one can study the response style in its purest form, provided the subjects are willing to complete the 'questionnaire.'

Using a 'questionnaire' without questions, in three studies (Berg & Rapaport, 1954; Van Heerden & Hoogstraten, 1979, 1980) 'positive' and affirmative

¹Requests for reprints should be sent to Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, Department of Education, P.O. Box 9507, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands.

categories were chosen above chance level. When there was no clear distinction in terms of positive and negative categories, the respondents maintained a non-committal attitude by choosing the most ambiguous alternative, e.g., 'sometimes,' 'may be,' etc. Type of instruction did not seem to influence subjects' preferences for certain options (Van Heerden & Hoogstraten, 1980). It was most astonishing that subjects seemed to be willing to participate in a 'meaningless' study.

Here it was hypothesized that the 'questionnaire' without questions leads to a higher rate of non-response than a 'normal' questionnaire, because confrontation with a paradoxical problem is frustrating. It was also hypothesized that response style is clearly manifest in the extremely ambiguous situation of answers without questions. In this respect, the present study focused on a replication of previous findings with an 'unstructured' questionnaire (Van Heerden & Hoogstraten, 1979, 1980). It was, however, not expected that the same response style would influence answers to meaningful questions from an attitude scale. It was hypothesized that response style does not reside in the respondents but is a product of the interactions between subjects and their perception of the research setting. Contrary to the opinion of Van Heerden and Hoogstraten (1979), its influence on reactions to a regular questionnaire would, then, be limited.

METHOD

The study was carried out with 175 first-year education students at the University of Leiden (The Netherlands). The students were asked to complete the questionnaire during one of the courses on methodology of behavioral sciences. Mean age of the students was 21 yr. (17% men, 83% women).

The questionnaire contained among others a scale of 25 items, measuring the attitude toward women's social roles (Slade & Jenner, 1978; Hubbard, Van IJzendoorn, & Tavecchio, 1982). Some examples of items are: "A woman's career is not as important as a man's," "Women are not suited to jobs of great stress and responsibility," "Women are as good as men at complicated technical matters." Subjects were asked if they strongly agree, mildly agree, or strongly disagree with every item. Alpha reliability was .87 ($n = 165$; 10 missing cases).

The 'questionnaire' without questions followed the attitude scale and was introduced with a short explanation of the procedure: "In this part of the questionnaire we want to check how well you can guess answers to questions which are unknown to you. On each of the following pages, a number is printed, followed by some answers. Sometimes these answers are words, sometimes figures or characters. The questions are, however, lacking. You are asked to choose one answer per item, that is, the alternative you think is the right answer to the question. You may suppose, that each alternative in principle fits the question.

We ask you to complete the items consecutively. Please select only one answer per item." Answers in the 'questionnaire' without questions are given in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the most conspicuous results is the students' readiness to respond to absent questions. Only five of the 175 subjects were not willing to give an

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE WITHOUT QUESTIONS

Item	Answers	<i>f</i>	%	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
1	yes	97	57	46.21	2	<.001
	not sure	46	27			
	no	27	16			
2	1	14	8	45.29	3	<.001
	2	51	30			
	3	73	43			
	4	32	19			
3	very satisfied	39	23	93.74	3	<.001
	satisfied	97	57			
	unsatisfied	21	12			
	very unsatisfied	13	8			
4	first	60	35	1.63	2	
	second	61	36			
	third	49	29			
5	true	96	56	2.84	1	
	false	74	44			
6	A	41	24	15.89	3	<.01
	B	47	28			
	C	59	35			
	D	23	13			
7	always	40	23	77.09	2	<.001
	sometimes	110	64			
	never	21	12			
8	agree	84	49	28.80	2	<.001
	indifferent	27	16			
	disagree	59	35			
9	0.0—1.5 cm	13	8	44.55	4	<.001
	1.5—3.5 cm	22	13			
	3.5—6.5 cm	63	37			
	6.5—8.5 cm	43	25			
	8.5—10 cm	30	17			
10	very certain	80	47	44.06	2	<.001
	neutral	74	44			
	very uncertain	16	9			

answer to one or more items. Compared to the nonresponse in case of the meaningful attitude scale (10 missing cases out of 175), this response rate is remarkably high. During completion of the questionnaire we observed that respondents wondered about the absence of questions but suspected a hidden meaning behind this kind of research. No motivation was necessary other than the presence of the experimenter. The authority of scientists has forced subjects before to much more inconceivable behavior than merely answering non-existing questions (Milgram, 1977).

In Table 1 the frequency distribution on the 10 items of the 'questionnaire' without questions are described. These distributions were tested for systematic deviations from the expected uniform distribution with Pearson's goodness-of-fit test, χ^2 . In almost all cases the observed distributions deviate significantly from the expected distribution. To the subjects the response categories did not appear to be completely meaningless, but they projected their own meaning onto the categories. The respondents have less affinity to negatively stated categories than to positive ones: the distributions on Items 1, 3, 8, and 10 are examples of this particular response style. The subjects also avoid 'extreme' answers, as is demonstrated on Items 2, 6, 7, and 9. Items 1, 8, and 10 deviate from this pattern, but avoiding negatively stated categories appears to play a more important role in answering to these items. The category 'indifferent' in Item 8 seems to have a much more negative connotation than 'agree' and 'disagree.' The respondents feel obliged to construct an opinion, although they do not have one. The explanation of the distribution in Item 9 can perhaps be traced to the width of the third category, c.q. 3 cm. Respondents appear to stay on the safe side by choosing the largest interval. In this case, maybe the tendency to avoid extreme answers has some influence as well; the percentages for the first and third category differ considerably.

There was no relationship between the scores on the scale measuring attitudes toward women's social role and the 10 items from the 'questionnaire' without questions. Response styles appear, at least partially, then to be situation-specific and not completely person-specific. Subjects who clearly show response styles in an extremely ambiguous situation, do not necessarily generalize this tendency to more meaningful settings. If the questions themselves contain enough cues, respondents do not need many irrelevant cues from the formal aspects of the questionnaire to choose an answer; the product of their deliberations, then, appears to be largely determined by the content of the questions.

Conclusion

Subjects are very willing to respond even to non-existing questions. Their answers are not fully arbitrary but partially determined by the information derived from formal characteristics of the questionnaires. In the extremely am-

biguous situation of a 'questionnaire' without questions these characteristics are the only indicators. The respondents tend to prefer positively stated or less extreme categories (Van Heerden & Hoogstraten, 1979, 1980). These response styles, however, do not appear to be person-specific, but at least partially dependent on the perceived research setting. Their influence is limited. The absence of any systematic relationship between the scores on an attitude scale and the answers on the 'questionnaire' without questions seem to indicate this. The scale measuring attitudes toward women's social roles does not seem liable to the response styles of the 'questionnaire' without questions.

This study accentuates the thesis that clarity and meaningfulness of the questions posed is crucial for the activation of response styles and other response tendencies (Nederhof, 1981). If the researcher forces the subjects to answer questions which they have not yet asked themselves, response styles are provoked. Construction of questionnaires demands thorough knowledge of the experiential world of the subjects. Respondents like to participate in research, even if they are asked to solve paradoxical problems. It is, however, their personal perception of these tasks that determines the research results. The content of the questions must direct and structure this perception, otherwise irrelevant cues will put response styles into operation.

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