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List experiments, past and present

Topic 2 – Learning more from what we already know

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Introduction

Eliciting truthful answers to sensitive questions is a key problem of survey research. If respondents fear negative repercussions for honesty, survey result will inevitably be biased. To mitigate this social desirability bias a wide range of methods has been suggested, from pledges of anonymity over non-stigmatized wording to indirect question techniques that use randomization mechanisms to hide individual responses.

Although a 'statistical truth serum' (Glynn 2013) may sound tempting, most techniques suffer one or more of the following drawbacks:

- They rely on the assumption that respondents understand or at least trust that the method works. Since a lack of trust in the secrecy and anonymity of the survey was the reason for employing the method in the first place, researchers might go in circles.

- It most certainly increases the cognitive load for the respondent, adding to the measurement error in the process.

- All methods reduce statistical power of the survey by inflating standard errors, leading to bigger sample sizes and thus higher survey costs.

- The techniques performance correlates with the prevalence of the characteristic in question, which in turn can even yield nonsensical results (percentages in excess of 100% or below 0%).

Since such shortcomings get constantly addressed by refinements of old and the development of new techniques, researchers can now choose from a wide array of competing methods, of which none so far can claim to be call

Methods / Problem statement

The aim of our talk is twofold:

First, we will present and discuss results of a meta-analysis of studies using the ICT. Although the performance of ICT and the Randomized Response Techniques (RRT) have already been scrutinized by meta-analyses, there have been no clear results, much less "a consensus or a description of best practice" (Lensvelt-Mulders 2005: 324).

Second, we will address a common restriction to indirect question techniques: their limitation to dichotomous yes-or-no-questions.

We will present and discuss first results of the Item Sum Technique (IST), a derivative of the ICT, which allows the phrasing of questions with metric outcomes in sensitive settings.

Results / Proposed solution

Much like former meta-analyses, we face the problem of heterogeneity within the examined studies. While the sheer influx in studies using ICT in recent years implies confidents in the method, most of the studies

still assume the more-is-better assumptions, relying solely on the fact, that indirect questions produce higher (if desirable) or lower (if undesirable) estimates. Results for the IST experiment are mixed, displaying functional restrains and a promising concept at the same time.

Conclusions

Bringing the two threads together, we give an outlook of the current constraints of dejeopardizing techniques in general and the 'list techniques' in special.