Third-Person versus Second-Person Vignettes in Survey Experimental Research on Sensitive Topics

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We explore whether the use of third-person vignettes in survey experiments is a useful or necessary strategy for attenuating social desirability bias. We review the motivation behind the technique and its past uses. Then we describe an experiment designed to compare patterns of responses between third-person and second-person vignettes where respondents might reveal socially undesirable preferences in answering follow-up questions. We find little difference between the response patterns for the third-person vignette as compared to the second-person vignette. This suggests that, at least for moderately sensitive topics, the use of direct questions within an experimental framework is sufficient to minimize social desirability bias: the use of third-person vignettes is unlikely to be necessary.

A consistent concern for survey researchers who study socially undesirable behaviors or attitudes (e.g. cheating, racism, drug use, abstaining from voting) is that respondents will choose not to reveal their true behaviors or attitudes when asked in a direct fashion. This social desirability bias in survey responses can result from subjects misremembering their own behaviors and attitudes in order to avoid cognitive dissonance or, more likely, strategically choosing to misrepresent their own behaviors and attitudes either because of embarrassment in front of an interviewer or because of the fear of material consequences resulting from the disclosure of the information (Tourangeau and Yan 2007).

Survey researchers have developed a series of techniques in order to address social desirability bias (Barton 1958; Mutz 2011: ch. 2). Most of these lay outside the experimental framework. These include asking direct questions using more casual or reassuring language (Näher and Krumpal 2012), asking about the sensitive behaviors of groups to which the respondent belongs without asking about the respondent directly (Brusco, Nazareno, and Stokes 2004), allowing for sealed ballot responses (Lawson et al. 2007; Scacco 2013), or using completely deidentifying techniques such as the randomized response technique (Warner 1965; Gingerich 2010) or the item count technique (Kuklinski, Cobb, and Gilens 1997) that allow for population estimates without the attribution of specific responses to individual research subjects.

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1 Thanks to Jim Kuklinski for comments on an earlier draft.
In addition to these strategies, population-based survey experiments typically aim to reduce social desirability bias in asking about sensitive topics by obscuring the question being studied within a narrative vignette (Mutz 2011: ch. 4). Take, for example, the study of respondents’ racial bias in evaluating political candidates in the United States. Rather than asking whether a subject would vote for a candidate who belongs to a racial minority and then calculating the percentage of the population that says yes or no, a researcher can instead provide a short description of a candidate that includes a variety of information, including his race. Within the survey experiment, the researcher then varies the race of the candidate across experimental conditions, with each respondent assigned at random to learn about a candidate of one race or another. The difference in the proportion of respondents who will vote for a candidate identified as belonging to a racial minority as compared to the proportion of respondents who will vote for a candidate identified as white arguably provides a truer estimate of the proportion of the population that maintains reservations about voting for a minority candidate. The experimental estimate should be more accurate than the direct question because the specific goal of the experiment is not immediately obvious to the respondents. A subject learns only about one candidate and then is asked about his or her voting intention; the candidate’s race is not highlighted and therefore neither is the opportunity for the respondent to avoid giving the answer that would be considered “racist” by observers.

The use of experimental vignettes is not limited to research on racial stereotypes. Of direct interest to us here, vignettes with embedded experimental treatments have been widely used in research on how voters respond to political corruption or scandal. Rundquist, Strom and Peters (1977) provide subjects with a description of a candidate’s partisanship, issue positions and place in the polls and then record respondents’ vote intentions; they then provide information that the candidate is corrupt and assess whether or not respondents change their vote choice. Funk (1996), Kulisheck and Mondak (1996), and Canache, Mondak and Cabrera (2000) provide respondents with newspaper articles about candidates in which they vary information about the integrity and competence of the candidates and then ask respondents to either evaluate the candidates or select a candidate to support with their vote. Muñoz, Anduiza, and Gallego’s (2012), Muñoz and Esaiasson (2013), and Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2013) use brief descriptions of incumbents running for reelection, varying information about corruption and the nature of their performance.

As Funk describes it, the underlying motivation for using a controlled experiment in this line of research is that “[s]ocial desirability pressures inherent to the survey setting may make it difficult for people to volunteer the importance of personal characteristics and traits in their evaluations of political
figures” (1996: 8). Specifically, in the case of corruption, respondents may be reluctant to admit a
tolerance for politicians who engage in corrupt acts. When information about corruption is included
alongside other relevant – and possibly redeeming – characteristics of a politician, a respondent might
more readily admit to her tolerance for such corruption. Then, by comparing how respondents react to
an otherwise identical politician, without the inclusion of corruption information, the researcher can
isolate the effects of information about corruption. In other words, the experimental setting draws
attention away from the object of study and thus allows for more truthful revelation of how people
react to potentially sensitive characteristics of candidates.

Although the experimental design is less obtrusive than direct questioning, most of the public
opinion experiments in this body of research still ask respondents directly about their own reaction to
the information that has been provided to them. And in many of the conditions — i.e., those that
mention the sensitive characteristic — the socially-desirable response remains obvious. For instance, a
white survey respondent in the United States might be reluctant to say that she would not vote for a
black politician — even when characteristics other than the candidate’s race are mentioned in a
vignette. In the topic we examine here, given strong anti-corruption norms, a respondent who learns
about a corrupt candidate may be swayed to give the socially-desirable, anti-corruption response, even
when other characteristics of the candidate (like the candidate’s partisanship or history of public goods
delivery) may provide some psychological “cover” for supporting a corrupt candidate. Just as with a
direct question, this might lead to an overestimate of the extent to which voters weigh concerns about
corruption in their electoral calculus and the extent to which they reject corrupt candidates.

Combining Strategies

As noted above, one strategy for insuring against social desirability bias is to ask survey respondents
to think about how someone other than themselves would reply to a sensitive question. A researcher
who wants to attenuate social desirability bias and recover the respondent’s true opinion might ask the
respondent to think about a person “like yourself” and then answer on behalf of that person.
The third-person question strategy has been employed in various contexts when asking sensitive
questions. In non-experimental, firm-level surveys about bribery and corruption, such as the World
Bank’s Enterprise Surveys, firm managers are asked to describe the amount of bribery that
“establishments like this one” engage in. This way, the manager does not have to say that her own firm

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2 A working paper by Muñoz and Esaission (2013) that we discuss below is an exception.
engages in bribery, only that firms like hers might do so. At the individual level, in the Mexico 2012 Panel Study (Lawson et al. 2012), the authors use a third-person question to better estimate levels of clientelism. Choosing the gender of the third person to match with that of the respondent, survey enumerators say, “Let’s suppose there is a person named Gabriel/Gabriela who is a citizen like you and lives in a community like yours. If someone offers Gabriel/Gabriela a large and varied basket of food in exchange for his/her vote, do you think Gabriel/Gabriela would accept?” Having asked about a third person, the researchers hope that respondents will answer more truthfully about their own engagement with socially undesirable clientelistic practices by having the respondent attribute the behavior to someone else.

These third-party questions might be asked either as standalone questions or in combination with an experimental vignette in which the researcher varies at random the information provided. The use of third-person questioning with an unobtrusive vignette offers two safeguards against social desirability bias. In addition to providing respondents with a greater level of comfort about offering socially undesirable responses, the third-person vignette provides the researcher with further control over the information respondents bring into their assessment of a situation. In providing respondents with information about political candidates, researchers want them to react to the information contained in the prompt and not to think about the particular characteristics of politicians that they know or about the extent to which the information that the researchers are giving them is applicable to their local politicians. Vignette-based research may quickly go awry if the most common reaction among recipients is to assert that the information contained in the vignette is not true because they already know the characteristics of their own politicians. By resituationg the respondent in some imagined context that is like his or her own and asking the respondent to answer for some imagined person who is like him or her, the researcher hopes to decrease the likelihood that the treatment will be overwhelmed by real-world information.

At the same time, the combination of third-party questioning with a randomly-assigned vignette involves some risks. At the most basic level, it involves additional narrative length and complication, possibly making the vignette more difficult for respondents to understand. Alternately, it is possible that respondents will so fully embrace the scenario that is given to them that they respond not with an answer reflecting how they themselves would act but rather with an answer based on how they think some imagined third party would act. If this is the case, then it becomes difficult for the experimenter

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3 See also the question wording about bribery used in Johnson et al. (2000) and Svensson (2003).
4 The 2006 Mexican Panel Study (Lawson et al. 2006) combined a third-person prompt with an experiment in a manner very similar to what we describe below.
to know what effect is being estimated: does the treatment effect reflect how the respondents react to the information provided in the vignette or rather how the respondents think some third party would react to the information provided in the vignette?\(^5\)

A working paper by Muñoz and Esaisson (2013) directly explores whether people answer differently for themselves versus a third person in responding to a question about candidate qualities. In their research design, after learning in a vignette about a hypothetical mayor who was either competent or not and either corrupt or not, respondents are asked whether they “thought that their close friend would vote for such a mayor in the next election” (8); respondents are then were asked about their own probability of voting for the mayor. For the two conditions where the mayor is not corrupt, Muñoz and Esaisson find little difference between asking about a friend’s intent and asking about the respondent’s own intent. In the corrupt conditions, however, the authors find that respondents were slightly more likely to say that a friend might vote for such a mayor, suggesting exactly that social desirability bias hindered respondents from saying that they personally would vote for a corrupt politician even though they were willing to say that they thought that “a friend” might do so. The structure of the question ordering, however, might heighten social desirability bias. Respondents were asked first about their friend’s behavior and then about their own; this could create a dynamic in which a respondent might feel compelled to say that she is even less likely than her friend to vote for the corrupt mayor.

In order to better understand whether or not the use of the third-person vignette leads to different response patterns as compared to an otherwise identical second-person vignette involving a sensitive topic, we constructed vignettes based on Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2013) where we vary information about the characteristics of a hypothetical politician — including corrupt behavior and public goods provision. We then randomly assigned respondents to hear either a second-person or a third-person vignette and question combination. Ultimately, we find little difference between the distribution of respondents’ own intended vote choices and the distribution of vote intentions attributed by our respondents to third persons. This suggests that, for moderately sensitive topics, the use of third-person vignettes does nothing additional to reduce social desirability bias compared with the unobtrusive “cover” already afforded by experimental vignettes.

**Methodology**

\(^5\) In looking at how firms answer the indirect questions about how many bribes other firms pay, Clarke (2012) discovers that bribery-averse firm managers register the highest estimates for the level of bribes that other firms are paying, suggesting the possibility of an overestimation of bribery levels.
As described above, a significant body of experimental research examines how voters understand political corruption and scandal. In part, this research is motivated by the resilience of political corruption despite the perception that voters do not like corruption. One possible explanation for persistent corruption is that voters overlook political corruption when politicians otherwise perform well in office (Anduiza, Gallego and Muñoz 2013; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013). The hypothesis that citizens might engage in a conscious trade-off between performance and corruption is difficult to test using straightforward, non-experimental questions. Given the social stigma attached to corruption, respondents may be reluctant to admit to supporting corrupt politicians, even when corruption is accompanied by other positive outcomes. This would be especially true if a survey were to pose sequential questions about different types of politicians, thus drawing respondents’ attention to variation in corruption. Using an experimental set-up with random assignment to learn about different “types” of politicians, possibly combined with questions about a third-person, should increase the probability that, to the extent corruption-tolerant attitudes exist among respondents, they are revealed in the survey.

In June 2012, we solicited 1,034 U.S. respondents to take a “short opinion survey” on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. After four background demographic questions, each respondent was told, “We would like to give you a hypothetical scenario and then ask you a few questions about it. There are no right answers to the questions. Please just give your opinion based on the information below.” He or she then observed one of thirty-two vignettes from a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design. The vignettes all described a mayor running for reelection. Across the vignettes, we followed Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2013) and randomized whether the mayor was described as having delivered public goods or not and as corrupt or not. For the purposes of understanding whether or not the third-person vignette affects response patterns, we randomized at the individual level whether the vignette was in the second or third person. For individuals selected to read the third-person vignettes, we altered the name of the third person to match with the respondent’s previously-reported gender. Within all vignettes, we randomized whether the mayor was a Democrat or a Republican. Finally, we also randomized whether the competence or the corruption information was presented first in the vignette.

The third-person vignette read as follows:

Let’s imagine that there is a person named John (or Jane): a person like you, who lives in a neighborhood like yours, but in a different city. The mayor of the city where John (or Jane) lives is running for reelection in November. He is a member of the Democratic (or

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6 For more on the use of Mechanical Turk in social science research, see Berinksy, Huber and Lenz (2012) and Mason and Suri (2012).
Republican} Party. In John’s {or Jane’s} city, it is well known that the mayor frequently {or never} takes bribes when giving out government contracts. The mayor has completed many {or very few} public works projects during his last term. The election is expected to be very close.

The second-person vignette was very similar:

Let’s imagine that you live in a neighborhood like yours but in a different city. The mayor of this hypothetical city is running for reelection in November. He is a member of the Democratic {or Republican} Party. In this city, it is well known that the mayor frequently {or never} takes bribes when giving out government contracts. The mayor has completed many {or very few} public works projects during his last term. The election is expected to be very close.

Respondents in the third-person vignette condition were then asked immediately following the vignette: “How likely do you think John {or Jane} is to vote for the mayor in the upcoming election?” and could choose from the options “very likely,” “likely,” “unlikely,” and “very unlikely.” Respondents in the second-person vignette condition were asked, “How likely are you to vote for the mayor in the upcoming election?” and given the same four choices.

All respondents then answered two additional follow-up questions that did not vary between the second-person and third-person vignettes: “Given what you know about this mayor, how trustworthy would you say he is in general?” and “Given what you know about this mayor, how effective would you say that he is at getting funds for local development projects from the national government?” Each question offered respondents similar choices to the first question from a four-value Likert scale.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the average responses to each of the three follow-up questions across the third-person and second-person vignettes for each of the four treatments of substantive interest to us. We report the differences between the third-person and second-person vignettes and the p-values for two-tailed t-tests with the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the third-person and second-person vignettes. None of the 12 t-tests is significant at the conventional 95 percent confidence level.

For the voting question, which varies along with the vignette between the second or third person, respondents in the second-person condition neither say that they are particularly less likely to vote for a corrupt mayor nor particularly more likely to vote for a well-performing mayor (the socially acceptable
answers) as compared to respondents in the third-person condition. Answers are slightly more negative in the second-person condition, but never significantly so.⁷

For the trust variable, there is a difference between the third-person and second-person vignettes in the (corrupt, competent) treatment that is significant at the 90 percent confidence level. This is the largest estimated difference between the two vignette types and the only one where the difference is significant at greater than the 0.10 level: respondents asked to imagine themselves in a different city rated the mayor as 0.16 points more trustworthy on a four-point scale as compared to respondents asked to imagine a third-person in a different city. The direction of this effect is, however, the opposite of what we hypothesized: respondents were slightly more willing to give a socially undesirable answer in the second-person condition as compared to the third-person condition. In the other three competence-corruption conditions, there is no meaningful difference between the third- and second-person vignettes.

For the effectiveness variable, we again find little difference in responses between the third- and second-person vignettes. In two of the corruption-competence conditions, respondents in the second-person condition were slightly more positive about the mayor, whereas in another, the respondents in the third-person condition were more positive about the mayor.

Our results differ slightly from those found in Muñoz and Esaiasson (2013). Like us, they find no difference between the third-person and second-person questions that they ask about honest politicians. They do, however, find differences between third-person and second-person questions when asking about corrupt politicians: respondents express somewhat less willingness to say that they themselves, as opposed to a friend, would vote for the corrupt politician. As we described above, they asked the two questions sequentially and always in the same order. This suggests that their results might be the effect of within-subject differences that result from social desirability bias originating in the question ordering. Our null results come from between-subject estimates.

Summary

Our experiment set out to test two alternative strategies for attenuating social desirability bias in survey experimental research. The use of experimental vignettes draws attention away from sensitive topics and thus should attenuate social desirability bias. At the same time, by necessity, at least some conditions in an experiment will ask respondents directly about their own attitudes or behavior on a

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⁷ Even when answers across all four treatment conditions are combined, the difference between the two types of vignette remains insignificant (results not reported).
sensitive topic. The use of third-person prompts is another strategy that has frequently been used in an attempt to address the risk of social desirability bias in (non-experimental) surveys. Combining third-person prompts with experimental vignettes might further reduce such bias. Thus, we compared second-person prompts and third-person prompts within an experimental framework. Our results suggest that respondents react similarly to third-person and second-person prompts and provide evidence that the use of third-person vignettes is likely to be unnecessary for research on moderately sensitive topics like political corruption.
Works Cited


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Table 1. Differences across Third-Person and Second-Person Vignettes. All three tables report the average value recorded on four-value Likert scales for each of the four information treatment categories and overall in the third-person and second-person vignette versions. The p-value is for a two-tailed t-test with the null hypothesis that there is no difference between the average response in the third-person and second-person vignettes.