

SEEKING "TRUTH" THROUGH NEGATIVITY

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A historic dilemma in obtaining consumer ratings of a battery of value statements (characteristics or attributes) has been the question of whether respondents give due consideration to each of the statements in assessing them. This becomes particularly problematic when such a question series is embedded in a long interview and the number of such statements to be rated is extensive. It is not unusual in such a question series to observe patterned responses among a subset of respondents. This could be indicative of the repetitive use of a single scalar response on the part of the respondent simply to move the interview along.

Various solutions which have been suggested to deal with this problem have been analytical in nature, such as entirely eliminating from the analysis the responses of any respondent who has more than 80% or 90% agreement in the scalar points used. Preferable to dealing with this problem analytically, however, would be somehow to affect a greater degree of sensitivity in respondents to each of the statements being measured, so that each is considered and rated individually and not as a continuous set.

The general practice in the research industry has been to word such statements in a positive way. The reasons for this are probably more emotional than rational. "Why be negative when one can be positive?" or "Why put a negative spin on things?" (The fact is, though that the bias of a positive spin can be as, or possibly more, compromising on influencing how people respond to a statement.) Logic also supports the use of positively worded statements. If a balanced verbal scale, such as a six point scale ranging from "agree strongly" to "disagree strongly" is used to measure the statements, then the use of the scale to express agreement or disagreement with a positively worded statement is fairly straightforward. In order to rate a negatively worded statement with such a scale, however, the need to use the negative side of the scale to disagree with the negativity of the statement (to agree with the sentiment of the statement) seems unduly confusing. Thus, positively worded statements prevail in the world of measurement.

Disposed though one may be to the use of positively worded statements, there are occasions in which the use of a negative statement is unavoidable. Examples of this would be, "I do not agree with the intent of Proposition 14" or "I do not want salt in my packaged foods".

In reviewing sets of data in which statement

wordings were generally positive with one or two exceptions, it was observed that the proportions of respondents using the extreme rating points of the scale (which are frequently more analytically insightful than the more central responses) generated by the negatively worded statements were frequently of a higher magnitude than those resulting from positively worded statements. This suggested that it was the negative nature of the statements which caused these differences and raised the question of what would happen if all of the statements were asked in a negative format. Would those which are "naturally" negative still tend to generate higher extreme rating scores, or would the scores be increased for all of the statements? If the latter were the case, then what is the import of this?

A series of six experiments sought to explore this question by having two separate but matched groups of respondents rate a battery of ten statements, the only difference between the two being that all the statements were positively worded for one group and negatively worded for the other. Both groups used the same six point balanced verbal scale ranging from "agree strongly" to "disagree strongly" - with a no neutral midpoint. All of the statements generally reflected personal values such as "I do (not) like to be the center of attention", or "I am (rarely) the first among my friends to try new products".

If the two groups which were rating either positively or negatively worded statements did generate different magnitudes of scores, then which one better represents "truth"? To gain insight into this, a third randomly matched control group was included which rated the same ten statements using bi-polar scales. For each statement, both the positively worded and negatively worded versions of the statement were provided on the right and left sides of the scale, respectively. Six boxes were provided between the two versions of the statements, simulating the six point scale used with the other experimental groups. The bi-polar scale was used as a control since it provides both the positive and negative versions of each statement for a respondent and thus presumably avoids the bias of providing only one or the other.

One other measurement which was initiated in the second iteration of this experiment was to have respondents, prior to rating the statements, indicate their disposition towards each of the statements on a simple

dichotomous “applies to me”/“does not apply to me” basis. This pre-measure was included to permit an analysis of the data among those who were consistent in their pre-measure response and the ratings they gave. This was done to determine whether there might have been confusion among those who had to use a double negative to express a positive reaction (use a negative rating to express disagreement with a negatively worded statement).

In the fourth wave of this experiment, three new statements were added to the list to be rated which addressed general opinions rather than personal values (“Frozen food is (not) nutritious”; “TV news is (not) accurate”; “Store brand items are (not) good quality”). The list of statements was further increased in the fifth wave to include public policy issues (“I do (not) support gun control laws”; “I do (not) trust the President”; “The death penalty is (not) a necessary option”). Thus for the fifth and sixth waves of the study each respondent was asked to rate 16 different statements.

The methodological parameters for this study were as follows: all of the interviews were self-administered in central locations. The first four waves included only women and the last two waves included both men and women on a 50/50 basis. All of the respondents were between 18 and 65 years of age. The sample sizes on a per cell basis were as follows:

- Wave 1 ≈ 220
- Wave 2 ≈ 125
- Wave 3 ≈ 250
- Wave 4 ≈ 180
- Wave 5 ≈ 150
- Wave 6 ≈ 115

For the analysis, the data was separately analyzed for top rating response, top two ratings responses, bottom rating response and means. The most dramatic differences were observed for the top rating response which consequently provided the basis for the analysis. The use of the extreme scalar points represents the strongest degree of commitment on the part of a respondent and thus is most likely to magnify what differences might exist. This analysis reflects the top rating responses.

For the analysis, respondents rating positive statements positively were compared to respondents rating negative statements negatively; thus respondents agreeing strongly with the statement “I do support gun control laws” were compared to those disagreeing strongly with the statement “I do not support gun control laws”.

Study Findings

In every one of the six phases of measurement almost all of the negative statements generated a higher

magnitude of extreme positive scores than the positive statements. In other words, the negatively worded statements generated a higher level of agreement or positive reactions to the statements. The differences appeared only for those who expressed a positive point of view. Among those who were negative towards the statements, there were no differences between those who rated the positive or negative statements.

In comparing these results to the bi-polar measurements, the levels of positive agreement resulting from the use of the bi-polar scales was comparable to the results obtained with the negatively worded statements. In other words, in most cases, the positively worded statements generated significantly lower extreme positive scores than the bi-polar measurements.

The strong convergence in the results between the bi-polar and negatively worded statements would suggest that the considerations which respondents give to negatively worded statements reflects more of a balanced judgement. This might be due to the challenging nature of a negative statement for someone who has a positive view. A negative statement certainly would all but eliminate the yea-saying bias which is characteristic of the repetitive use of a scale to measure a battery of statements. Suggesting to someone who believes in gun control laws that they don’t believe in gun control laws challenges them and thus might evoke more of a consideration about the statement being measured. There may be some confusion about the use of a double negative to express a positive viewpoint, but the results of these experiments would indicate that whatever bias does exist is negligible, relative to the distortions which occur when people are asked to rate a battery of positively worded statements.

These results were similar for both women and men. Additionally, the results did not change when the samples were “cleaned” to eliminate respondents who gave inconsistent pre and post responses to a statement; i.e., those who first said that a statement did not apply to them but subsequently gave it a positive rating, or vice versa. The differences between positive and negative statements were only observed among those who were positive towards the issues. There were no significant differences between the two groups among respondents who were negative towards the issues.

Some particular statements did not conform to these results. An example was the death penalty statement for which the positive and negative statements generated similar results. Interestingly, the scores in both cases were substantially lower than the corresponding ratings obtained from the bi-polar scales.

The conditions under which these measurements were obtained did not permit the rigorous utilization of sampling procedures. A mall interviewing context is not

ideal for providing any kind of projectable sample. Nonetheless, the samples obtained, were matched by random assignment on a rotating basis and the fact that six different samples obtained over a one year period provided the same results each time, has to provide substance for the findings. It would seem that the question now is not so much of whether negatively and positively worded statements measure differently, but why do they do so, and which cut closer to accurately measuring how people feel about issues.

Should we be asking people "Would you vote for Clinton for President in 1996?" or "You wouldn't vote for Clinton for President in 1996, would you?". It does sound like the old "When did you stop beating your grandmother" question, but it just may be that the old saw has been inappropriately abused all these years.

Table 1

WAVE - I

(Positive Disposition Towards Item)

- Top Rating -

	Positive Statements "Agree Strongly"	Bi-Polar Top Box	Negative Statements "Disagree Strongly"
Base:	(219) %	(221) %	(230) %
I am (not) concerned about the nutritional value of the foods I eat.	53<	<input type="checkbox"/> 69	63
I do (not) like highly seasoned food.	15<	<input type="checkbox"/> 25	19
I rarely/usually seek out the advice of others when making important personal decisions.	6<	<input type="checkbox"/> 24	20
I am rarely/usually the first among my friends to try new products.	15<	<input type="checkbox"/> 34	30
I am (not) concerned with living up to expectations others have of me.	9	15	15
I rarely/usually price-shop for products.	42<	<input type="checkbox"/> 58	50
I do (not) like to be the center of attention.	4	6	8
During the past 2 years, my household financial situation has been getting worse/better.	21	28	26
I am (not) disciplined in how I spend and save money.	28<	<input type="checkbox"/> 39	44
It is (not) important to me what my friends think about the brands of products I buy.	5	6	10

=Significantly higher at the 99% level of confidence or better.

Table 2

WAVE- I

(Negative Disposition Towards Item)

- Bottom Rating -

	Positive Statements “Disagree Strongly”	Bi-Polar Bottom Box	Negative Statements “Agree Strongly”
Base:	(219)	(221)	(230)
	%	%	%
I am (not) concerned about the nutritional value of the foods I eat.	5	3	6
I do (not) like highly seasoned food.	4	9	5
I rarely/usually seek out the advice of others when making important personal decisions.	16	11	12
I am rarely/usually the first among my friends to try new products.	6	11	5
I am (not) concerned with living up to expectations others have of me.	27	28	20
I rarely/usually price-shop for products.	6	6	7
I do (not) like to be the center of attention.	26	31 → 18	
During the past 2 years, my household financial situation has been getting worse/better.	12	9	11
I am (not) disciplined in how I spend and save money.	7	6	4
It is (not) important to me what my friends think about the brands of products I buy.	48	51	46

=Significantly higher at the 99% level of confidence or better.

Table 3
WAVE - VI
 (Positive Disposition Towards Item)
 - Top Rating -

	Positive Statements “Agree Strongly”	Bi-Polar Top Box	Negative Statements “Disagree Strongly”
Base:	(115) %	(112) %	(120) %
I am (not) concerned about the nutritional value of the foods I eat.	30←	59	→38
I do (not) like highly seasoned food.	13←	41	36
I rarely/usually seek out the advice of others when making important personal decisions.	8←	30	16
I am rarely/usually the first among my friends to try new products.	10←	34	20
I am (not) concerned with living up to expectations others have of me.	6←	18	13
I rarely/usually price-shop for products.	26←	53	→40
I do (not) like to be the center of attention.	4←	15	11
During the past 2 years, my household financial situation has been getting worse/better.	17←	48	→28
I am (not) disciplined in how I spend and save money.	24←	44	36
It is (not) important to me what my friends think about the brands of products I buy.	4	8	8
Frozen food is (not) nutritious.	11←	32	→15
TV news is (not) accurate.	4←	14	10
Store brand items are (not) good quality.	12←	29	17

I do (not) support gun control laws.	30←	47	44
I do (not) trust the president.	9←	23	17
The death penalty is (not) a necessary option.	36←	52	41

=Significantly higher at the 99% level of confidence or better.