

The Survey as a Burden – How Interview Length Affects the Measurement of Subjective Well-being

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Abstract: Both researchers and data collectors increasingly realize that participation in a survey constitutes a task which requires effort from the participants. This study asks whether increased burden, expressed in a lengthier interview, affects individuals in such a way that their responses may change as a result. Satisfaction with life serves as an example, as it appears to be intuitive to expect that a feeling of being annoyed and exhausted from a lengthy interview may lead to an unpleasant situation in which the respondent's aversion towards the survey provokes a negativity bias. To have quasi-experimental variation in the interview burden, the varying number of questions in a large household survey, the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), is used as an exogenous trigger. The number of questions for one person in one survey year depends on several factors in the individual's life, which can be controlled for regarding their general effect on life satisfaction. Most importantly, the amount of additional burden that results from giving the same answer in different survey years varies because of changing questionnaire design, as survey organizers drop or add questions over time for reasons unrelated to the specific situation of the participant. This exogenously given number of questions appears as a suitable instrument for interview length, which is reported in the SOEP. The results reveal that longer interviews affect self-reported happiness negatively. This finding of a measurement bias is important for interpreting results based on existing survey data and is of central relevance for the design of future surveys.

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