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The Effects of Vignette Placement on Attitudes Toward Supporting Family Members

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Abstract

Vignettes are useful for measuring norms and beliefs, but little is known about how vignette placement affects responses to subsequent attitude questions. We investigate how the placement of a vignette about parents and adult children living together affects answers to subsequent questions about family obligations in a survey of the U.S. population. We randomly assigned the order of the vignette and three single-statement attitude questions. For the single-statement question about family members living together, the effect of vignette placement depended on respondents' original attitudes. For individuals with ambivalent or positive attitudes, asking the vignette before the attitude questions doubled reports of favorable attitudes. Vignette placement had no effect for those with negative attitudes. For the single-statement attitude questions about financial support between parents and adult children, vignette placement had no effect, suggesting that vignette placement may only influence subsequent questions about the same topic.

Keywords

context effect; order effect; vignette; attitude; experiment

Introduction

The recent increase in young adults living with their parents (Mykyta and Macartney 2011) has sparked discussion about what type of support family members should provide each other. Attitudes about family obligations inform public policy and legal statutes. Sociological theories about family change posit that cultural values about family roles and responsibilities affect marriage and childbearing (Lesthaeghe 1995). These theories find

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Authors Note

Sadly, Suzanne Bianchi passed away before the final publication of this article.

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Supplemental Material

The online data supplements are available at <http://fmj.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

support in empirical research, which shows that family attitudes predict how individuals behave (Silverstein et al. 2006).

Attitudes toward family responsibilities and support are typically measured using single-statement agree/disagree survey questions. Several studies have used vignettes to measure more complex attitudes (Nock et al. 2008; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Seltzer et al. 2012). In a vignette study, respondents provide judgments about hypothetical scenarios. Characteristics of these scenarios are randomly assigned, allowing researchers to study the factors that shape individuals' attitudes with high levels of internal validity (Atzmüller and Steiner 2010). Due to this advantage, a growing number of social science studies use vignettes (Wallander 2009).

Surveys with vignettes also often include single-statement questions that measure more general attitudes. In such surveys, researchers face a crucial question, that is, should vignettes be placed before or after general attitude questions? The answer is important, given the evidence about question order effects (Schwarz and Sudman 1992; Sudman et al. 1996). Vignettes may affect responses to subsequent questions through two types of priming. First, the specific information in a vignette conveys researchers' goals and creates a lens through which respondents interpret what subsequent questions are asking (Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988), particularly when those questions leave room for interpretation (Schuman and Presser 1981). We refer to this as the "comprehension mechanism." Evidence that vignettes enhance comprehension comes from Hopkins and King's (2010) finding that vignettes placed before attitude questions help respondents better understand the questions following the vignette. Second, questions also may prime respondents to hold certain emotions, facts, or beliefs in working memory, affecting the information respondents retrieve when answering subsequent questions ("retrieval mechanism").

Survey researchers concerned about bias due to priming typically recommend placing questions that may prime respondents after other questions (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Although seemingly straightforward, this guidance can sometimes be challenging to implement because of the large number of potentially priming questions. In addition, it can be difficult to know when questions might prime respondents. Tourangeau et al. (2003:487) argue that context effects require that "the items involved have some clear conceptual relation to each other," offering the example of the lack of context effects for items about tax policy and women's rights. However, the situation is often not so clear cut: Surveys generally include items that fall along a continuum of conceptual closeness—some items are very closely linked (e.g., women's rights and abortion), some items are about a similar but not the same topic (e.g., women's rights and political ideology), and other items are mostly unrelated (e.g., women's rights and tax policy). Given the continuum of conceptual closeness, it is unclear when researchers should be concerned about priming effects.

Our study uses a split ballot experiment to investigate how vignette placement affects responses to three single-statement attitude questions. The three single-statement questions differ in their similarity to the vignette—one question asks about the same topic as in the vignette and two questions ask about a similar but not the same topic. By studying two types of context effects—one where the items are closely linked and another where the items are

more tenuously linked—we explore the degree of conceptual similarity necessary to produce order effects.

Our study also contributes to another unresolved question in the survey methodology literature. Some studies find that context effects are greater among people with weak attitudes (Schwarz et al. 1991). Auspurg and Jäckle (2012) find that individuals with weak attitudes are more susceptible to order effects of characteristics within a vignette. Other studies find no association between context and attitude strength (see review by Tourangeau et al. 2003). We contribute to this literature by investigating how vignette placement effects depend on individuals' original attitudes (ambivalent, positive, and negative attitudes). Although most previous research focuses on attitude strength (i.e., strong vs. weak), we focus on context effects among individuals with ambivalent attitudes. Ambivalence is having a mix of positive and negative attitudes and represents a separate dimension of attitude measurement from attitude strength (Conner and Armitage 2008).

Experimental Design

Data and Measures

We analyze survey data from the Knowledge Networks online panel (currently called GfK's KnowledgePanel). The panel uses a dual-frame national probability sample that is based on address-based sampling and random-digit telephone dialing. Individuals without Internet access are given a laptop to complete the surveys and those with Internet access receive points redeemable for cash (GfK 2013). The survey was fielded in August 2009, during the U.S. economic downturn, when many individuals were concerned about losing their homes. The analysis sample includes 3108 adults of age 18 and older, excluding 24 respondents with missing data. The cooperation rate was 70%; the cumulative response rate was 9%. We used a study-specific poststratification weight to adjust the data to demographic distributions from the U.S. Current Population Survey. All analyses are weighted.

The survey introduced a vignette about a hypothetical parent or adult child who has lost his or her home. Respondents were asked about the desirability of that person moving in with family members; response options were *good idea*, *bad idea*, *it depends*, and *don't know*. Respondents were then asked why they chose their response to the vignette question. Responses were recorded in an open-ended text box. We varied the following five dimensions in the vignette: whether or not the adult child has a young child; the adult child's relationship status (married, cohabiting, and single); whether the adult child is a man or a woman; the anticipated length of coresidence (3 months, indefinite); and whether the adult child or parent needs housing. Each respondent was presented with one vignette in which the characteristics were randomly assigned.

The survey also included three single-statement attitude questions about family responsibilities. The first question, adapted from the U.S. General Social Survey (<http://www3.norc.umd.edu/GSS+Website/>), asked about the desirability of adult children and their parents living together, the same topic as in the vignette. Response options also were the same as in the vignette. The two other questions, adapted from the National Survey of Families and Households (<http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/nsfh/>), asked about a slightly different

topic as follows: whether adult children and their parents should provide each other with financial help.

We randomly assigned respondents to receive the vignette question before or after the three single-statement attitude questions. Figure 1 shows the question order of the two conditions, the exact wording for the attitude questions, and an example of a vignette.

Hypotheses

We anticipate that the vignette will influence answers to the single-statement attitude question about family members *living together*, but that the effect will be conditional on whether respondents have ambivalent, positive, or negative attitudes about coresidence. For individuals with ambivalent attitudes—those who say *it depends* in response to the vignette—the vignette may clarify the meaning of the single-statement question through the comprehension mechanism, leading to more favorable responses. The single-statement question is vague because it does not specify important aspects of the situation (e.g., why help is needed, who needs help) that affect attitudes about family members living together (Nock et al. 2008; Seltzer et al. 2012). Respondents answering this single-statement question may think of a mix of situations, some eliciting favorable responses (e.g., when help is needed due to the poor economy) and others unfavorable responses (e.g., when help is needed due to personal irresponsibility). This vignette about economic hardship likely encourages respondents to think about more sympathetic situations, when help is needed due to poor economic conditions that affect most Americans, thus fostering more positive attitudes among those who hold ambivalent attitudes.

There also may be effects of vignette placement for those with positive or negative views but for different reasons than for those with ambivalent views. For these individuals, the vignette may affect the types of information respondents retrieve when considering their response. For individuals with positive attitudes (those who say *good idea*), the vignette may activate internal values of altruism or remind respondents of when they benefited from a family member's help, solidifying their views and leading to more favorable responses. For those with negative attitudes (those who say *bad idea*), the vignette might remind respondents of unpleasant experiences living with family members, thereby reinforcing negative views of coresidence.

The effects of vignette placement on responses to the single-statement attitude questions about *financial support* are difficult to predict. On the one hand, the vignette might prime respondents (in a positive or negative way) to think about experiences or values related to family obligations, thereby influencing responses. Providing a home for a family member is another form of financial assistance to family members (Seltzer and Bianchi 2013). On the other hand, offering housing help and helping with money are conceptually distinct. Living together involves more loss of privacy and a more intense form of help than providing financial support, so the vignette's priming effects may not carry over to subsequent questions about financial support. Therefore, the existence of a vignette placement effect hinges on the extent to which respondents view financial transfers and living together as conceptually related. Exploring the influence of the vignette on this question about financial

support sheds light on the degree of conceptual similarity required for context effects to occur.

Results

Attitudes about Family Members Living Together

The results in Table 1 show that placing the vignette first increased *good idea* responses and decreased *it depends* responses, $F(3, 9318) = 21.5$; $p < .01$, to the single-statement question about living together. When the single-statement attitude question was asked before the vignette, 17% responded *good idea* and 66% said *it depends* to the attitude question. When the attitude question was asked after the vignette, 30% responded *good idea* and 49% said *it depends*. Placing the vignette first did not increase the percentage of *bad idea* responses.

In Table 2, we show how vignette placement affects responses to the single-statement attitude question about coresidence, separately by responses to the vignette question (*good idea*, *bad idea*, and *it depends*). There were too few *don't know* responses (3%) to investigate separately. Among those who said coresidence in the vignette was a *good idea*, asking the single-statement question about living together after the vignette increased *good idea* responses and decreased *it depends* responses ($p < .01$). There was not, however, any effect of vignette placement for respondents who said *bad idea* to the vignette ($p = .47$).

For individuals who said *it depends* to the vignette question, the vignette decreased *it depends* and increased *good idea* responses ($p < .01$). A supplementary analysis using multinomial logistic regression confirmed that the effects of vignette placement depended on answers to the vignette question (see the online supplement). We also found that characteristics of the vignette (e.g., the presence of a young grandchild) did not affect the strength of the vignette placement effect (not shown).

Attitudes about Financial Transfers

Table 3 contains the analysis about whether vignette placement affects the two single-statement attitude questions about financial support. The left panel shows that vignette placement did not affect responses to the question about parents giving money to adult children, $F(4, 12,365) = 1.3$; $p = .26$. Similarly, the right panel shows no effect of vignette placement on responses about adult children giving parents money, $F(4, 12,108) = 1.3$; $p = .27$. The lack of an effect for these questions about transferring money contrasts with the large effects for the attitude question about coresidence. We explored a variety of interactions between vignette characteristics and vignette placement for both attitude questions, but none of these interactions were statistically significant.

Discussion

We used a split ballot experiment to investigate how the placement of a vignette about family members living together affected responses to subsequent single-statement attitude questions. We found that placing the vignette before a single-statement attitude question on the same topic doubled favorable attitudes, but the effect depended on respondents' original

attitudes. In contrast, vignette placement did not affect responses to single-statement attitude items about a similar but distinct topic.

These findings contribute to an understanding of context effects in two ways. First, our results show that context effects exist for individuals with ambivalent attitudes as well as those with clear, positive attitudes. For individuals with ambivalent attitudes, the vignette about economic hardship may have clarified or improved comprehension of the single-statement attitude question, encouraging respondents to think about more favorable living situations, resulting in more positive attitudes. Although most previous research on conditional context effects focused on those with weak attitudes, our analysis suggests that individuals with ambivalent attitudes also are susceptible to context effects. Vignettes may enhance comprehension when respondents hold ambivalent attitudes, as in our study, as well as when respondents need help understanding what researchers are asking, as in Hopkins and King's (2010) study. To improve our knowledge of context effects among those with ambivalent attitudes, future research could investigate interactions between attitude ambivalence and strength. This would allow researchers to explore the possibility that even among individuals with ambivalent attitudes, those with stronger attitudes are more resistant to context effects.

Similarly, our results show that context effects occur among individuals with unequivocal, positive attitudes, adding to the evidence that context effects are not limited to those with weak attitudes. For individuals with initially positive attitudes about coresidence, asking the vignette first had a large effect on the expression of positive responses to the single-statement question on coresidence. For these individuals, the vignette may have elicited positive emotions about caregiving, producing more favorable responses to the coresidence question. We suspect that the open-ended text box, in which respondents explained their reactions to the vignette, encouraged respondents to explore their positive attitudes, reinforcing their beliefs and strengthening the priming effects through a retrieval mechanism. Notably, there was no vignette placement effect among respondents with unfavorable attitudes (those who said *bad idea* to the vignette). Individuals with negative attitudes may be more resistant to cues than are those with positive attitudes. Saying that coresidence is not a good idea, even when a child is in serious need of help, is a socially undesirable response. If individuals are willing to select this response, their views may be so strong and unequivocal that they are not susceptible to priming from the vignette. Future research could explore the conditions in which negative and positive priming occurs, particularly if such research measures attitude strength.

Second, our results provide guidance about when questionnaire designers should be concerned with context effects in vignette studies. When vignettes ask about the same topic as single-statement attitude items that are important to replicate, vignettes should be placed after the questions to be replicated. However, researchers should also consider the potential negative implications of this guidance for the quality of the vignette data. Vignettes are particularly vulnerable to fatigue effects (Sauer et al. 2011), so always placing vignettes at the end of a survey may increase measurement error in the vignette. Future research should investigate this possibility and explore the potential trade-offs in data quality.

When vignettes ask about a similar but distinct topic, however, researchers should be less concerned about context effects. Our experiment shows that the vignette about family members living together could have been placed before or after single-statement attitude questions about financial transfers without compromising data quality. These results are encouraging for questionnaire designers who sometimes face the difficult task of minimizing question order effects while maintaining the desired structure and flow of the questionnaire. At least in surveys about family responsibilities, our results suggest that researchers should be concerned about context effects among items that ask about the same topic but less concerned about items that ask about related but distinct topics. Future research should continue to explore the degree of conceptual similarity that is needed to produce context effects on different topics and also using a broader range of items that differ in their conceptual closeness. This research could benefit from including a contingent response category (e.g., *it depends*), as we did in this study, to identify respondents with ambivalent attitudes and identify the mechanism of context effects.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Condition #1: VIGNETTE IS <u>AFTER</u> STANDARD QUESTIONS	Condition #2: VIGNETTE IS <u>BEFORE</u> STANDARD QUESTIONS
<p>ATTITUDE QUESTIONS As you know, many older people share a home with their grown children. Do you think this is generally a good idea or bad idea?</p> <p>☐ Good idea ☐ Bad idea ☐ It depends ☐ Don't know</p> <p>How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?</p> <p>Parents ought to provide financial help to their adult children when the children are having financial difficulty.</p> <p>☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree</p> <p>Children ought to provide financial help to aging parents when their parents are having financial difficulty.</p> <p>☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree</p> <p>VIGNETTE * John and his family are having financial trouble and they have lost their home. John, his girlfriend, and their young child need a place to live for the next three months. John's older mother lives nearby. Do you think it is generally a good idea or a bad idea for John and his girlfriend and their young child to move in with John's mother?</p> <p>☐ Good idea ☐ Bad idea ☐ It depends ☐ Don't know</p>	<p>VIGNETTE * John and his family are having financial trouble and they have lost their home. John, his girlfriend, and their young child need a place to live for the next three months. John's older mother lives nearby. Do you think it is generally a good idea or a bad idea for John and his girlfriend and their young child to move in with John's mother?</p> <p>☐ Good idea ☐ Bad idea ☐ It depends ☐ Don't know</p> <p>ATTITUDE QUESTIONS As you know, many older people share a home with their grown children. Do you think this is generally a good idea or bad idea?</p> <p>☐ Good idea ☐ Bad idea ☐ It depends ☐ Don't know</p> <p>How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?</p> <p>Parents ought to provide financial help to their adult children when the children are having financial difficulty.</p> <p>☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree</p> <p>Children ought to provide financial help to aging parents when their parents are having financial difficulty.</p> <p>☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree</p>
<p>*Sample vignette. See text for description of the characteristics of the vignette that were varied.</p>	

Figure 1.
Question order in split ballot questionnaires.

Table 1

Attitudes toward Intergenerational Coresidence (GSS Question), by Placement of Vignette (Percentages).

“As you know, many older people share a home with their grown children. Do you think this is generally a good idea or bad idea?” (GSS question)	Question asked before vignette	Question asked after vignette
Good idea	17	30
Bad idea	14	15
It depends	66	49
Don’t know	4	6
<i>p</i> Value*	<.01	

Note: GSS = U.S. General Social Survey. *N* = 3,108. Data are weighted.

* *p* Values are based on Pearson χ^2 tests.

Table 2
Attitudes toward Intergenerational Coresidence (GSS Question), by Vignette Response and Placement (Percentages).

GSS question	Vignette response					
	Good idea (<i>n</i> = 910)		Bad idea (<i>n</i> = 399)		It depends (<i>n</i> = 1,701)	
	Question asked before vignette	Question asked after vignette	Question asked before vignette	Question asked after vignette	Question asked before vignette	Question asked after vignette
Good idea	28	48	9	7	12	27
Bad idea	8	3	29	38	13	17
It depends	62	47	60	54	72	49
Don't know	2	2	2	2	3	7
<i>p</i> Value *	<.01		.47		<.01	

Note: GSS = U.S. General Social Survey. Data are weighted.

* *p* Values are based on Pearson χ^2 tests.

Table 3

Attitudes toward Financial Support (NSFH Questions), by Placement of Vignette (Percentages).

	“Parents ought to provide financial help to their adult children when the children are having financial difficulty”		“Children ought to provide financial help to aging parents when their parents are having financial difficulty”	
	Question asked before vignette	Question asked after vignette	Question asked before vignette	Question asked after vignette
Strongly agree	5	6	16	19
Agree	33	29	51	47
Neither agree nor disagree	50	51	29	31
Disagree	11	12	2	2
Strongly disagree	2	3	1	0
<i>p</i> Value *	.26		.27	

Note: NSFH = National Survey of Families and Households. *N* = 3,108. Data are weighted.

* *p* Values are based on Pearson χ^2 tests.