

A defiance attitude towards experts? On the influence of emphasising researcher's expertise on participants' causal attribution ratings in a closed-response format

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Abstract

Objectives. Formal features of a questionnaire influence self-reports on central psychological constructs such as causal attributions: Using open-response formats Norenzayan and Schwarz (1999) demonstrated that respondents provided causal explanations for a given event corresponding with the researcher's communicated research field. Extending this, our research investigates the influence of emphasising the researcher's expertise on causal attributions using closed-response formats.

Methods. In a 3 (field of research: personality, social, criminology) \times 2 (emphasis of expertise: yes, no) between-subjects design, students ($N = 144$) rated the importance of specified personality-based causal explanations for a crime.

Results. ANCOVA analysis (covariates: age, gender, personality dimensions) yielded a significant disordinal medium-sized interaction: When expertise was emphasised for the personality researcher, importance ratings of personality reasons decreased, whereas these ratings increased when expertise was emphasised for the social researcher.

Conclusion. Respondents oppose authority and emphasise causal attributions contrary to the researcher's epistemic interest when expertise is emphasised.

Introduction

Research on questionnaire design indicates that context information exerts a systematic influence on respondents' answers (e.g., Galesic & Tourangeau, 2007; Spörrle, Gerber-Braun & Försterling, 2007; Schwarz & Oyserman, 2001). Norenzayan and Schwarz (1999) demonstrated that participants being asked to enumerate reasons for a crime in an open-response format, tended to provide explanations fitting into the researcher's field of interest (i.e., social research vs. personality research).

Two explanations for this effect were provided: First, it is said to occur due to cognitive availability effects (i.e., naming the research field activates corresponding mental content).

Second, communication principles, specifically the maxim of relevance, state that participants communicate the information they consider to be relevant to the researcher, that is, for example, social information for the social research scientist.

In order to test for these assumptions, this study used a closed-response format, thereby excluding the explanation of differences in answering tendencies due to different cognitive priming. As all participants rated the importance of the same explanations, different results should not be based on cognitive availability.

Moreover, our study is the first to examine the effects of emphasising the researcher's expertise in his field of research as a potential moderator of the communicative influence of the field of research.

Method

Participants. Overall, $N = 144$ participants (50% females, 94.4% students) aged from 19 to 33 ($M = 23.61$, $SD = 3.08$) took part in this research.

Design. The study is based on a 3 \times 2 between-subjects design.

The first independent variable was the researcher's area of expertise: The survey seemed to be carried out by either the institute for social research, the institute for personality research or the institute for criminology (control condition).

The second independent variable was the emphasis of the researcher's expertise (emphasised vs. not emphasised).

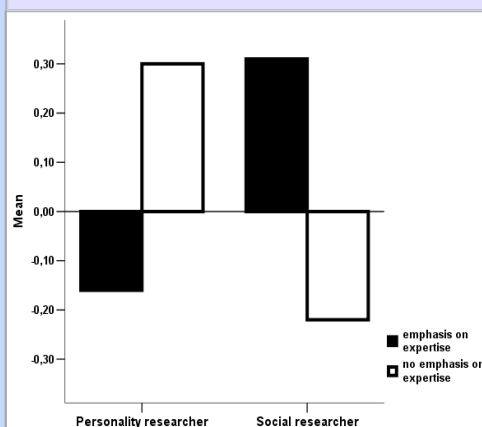
Material and Procedure. In a paper-pencil study the information about the researcher's institute (given on the first page and in the footing of every page) was manipulated, as well as the presence or absence of one sentence on the first page, emphasising the researcher's expertise.

On a six-point-Likert-scale, participants were asked to rate three social reasons and three personality-related reasons regarding their potential power to explain a case of crime in which two teenagers murdered a homeless person.

Additionally, the BFI-K (Rammstedt & John, 2005) assessed the participants' personality traits.

Results

Subsequent analyses are based on the mean of the z-transformed values of the personality reasons. ANCOVA analysis with age, gender and the BFI-K personality dimensions as covariates, showed a significant disordinal medium-sized interaction between the emphasis on expertise and the researcher's institute, $F(2, 130) = 6.86$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.10$ (see Figure).



Furthermore, analysis indicated a significant positive correlation ($r = .21$, $p < .05$) between the dimension extraversion in the BFI-K and the rating of importance of personality-related explanations, $F(1, 130) = 4.67$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.04$. Post-hoc t-tests separately investigated the difference between the ratings of the personality explanations in the salience of expertise versus non-salience of expertise condition for the three experimentally induced areas of expertise: There was no significant effect in the control condition (i.e., institute for criminology), $M = -0.07$, $SD = 0.71$ (non-salience condition), $M = -0.14$, $SD = 0.68$ (salience condition), $t(46) = 0.34$, $p > .70$.

Analogous t-tests for the other two institutes reached significance: Personality-related explanations gained importance when the social researcher's expertise was emphasised, $M = -0.27$, $SD = 0.56$ (non-salience condition), $M = 0.31$, $SD = 0.50$ (salience condition), $t(46) = 3.75$, $p < .01$. They were rated less important when the expertise was emphasised for the personality researchers, $M = 0.32$, $SD = 0.47$ (non-salience-condition), $M = -0.17$, $SD = 0.84$ (salience condition), $t(46) = 2.50$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

In this study, respondents' tendency to provide answers according to the pretended field of expertise of the researcher (cf. Norenzayan & Schwarz, 1999), was confirmed for the first time when using closed-response formats, thus limiting the explanatory power of potential priming by means of the researcher's affiliation. Respondents attributing more explanatory power to potential reasons explicitly provided is, nonetheless, in line with maxims of communication, such as the maxim of relevance (cf. Grice, 1975).

However, these results were only obtained, when the expertise of the researcher was not emphasised (i.e., in a condition identical with the paradigm of Norenzayan & Schwarz, 1999). When the questionnaire explicitly stressed the researcher's expertise, participants ascribed less importance to personality-related explanations when the researcher came from the field of personality research whereas participants rated the same explanation higher when the researcher emphasised his expertise in the domain of social research. This disordinal interaction points to a potential defiance attitude. If the researcher seems to be too sure about his own expertise, the respondents might punish him by devaluating causal reasons from his domain of work or they might want to draw his attention to some aspects the researcher might not have considered yet.

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