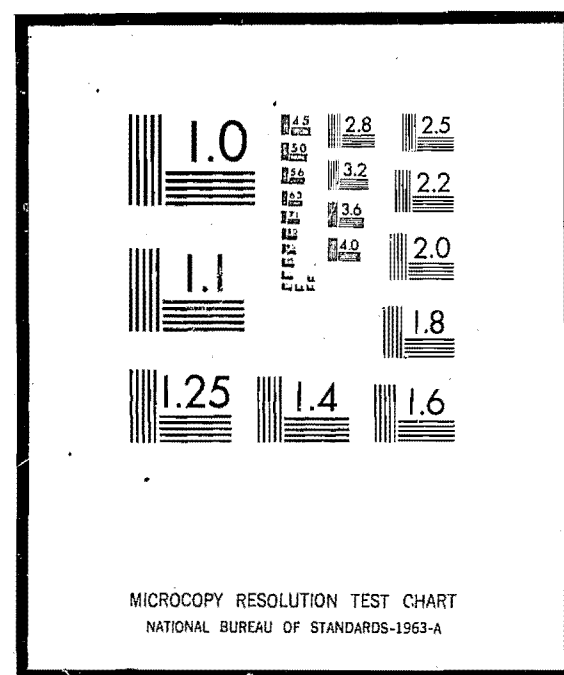


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TIME DISTORTIONS OF VICTIMIZATION DATA AND MNEMONIC EFFECTS

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Elsewhere (Biderman, 1968; Biderman and Reiss, 1968; Biderman et al., 1967), apparent and suspected distortions in victimization interview data are discussed which may stem from difficulties of recall of victimization incidents within the context of the interview. Here, some hypotheses regarding factors producing such distortions will be discussed along with means for their control by interviewing technique.

The observed time distortions (selective recall by time and backward and forward telescoping) are hypothesized to involve two distinct psychological components which we will call (1) the demand-characteristic effect of the interview (following Orne's [1961] usage) and (2) the temporal mnemonic effect.

Demand-Characteristic Effects

Effects of the first type are specific to the interview situation. As in a great many experimental (and other) social situations, they involve the accommodation of the subject to implicit wishes or expectations of the interviewer. They are presumably most characteristic of the "highly cooperative" informant, although the literature on reluctant informants indicates that "satisfying the interviewer" is a frequent mode of response in such cases as well (Biderman, 1960). In the case of incident interviewing, the long series of questions and probes asking if particular types of incidents happened during the reference time period places the subject in the position of repeatedly giving negative replies. He may experience

these as frustrating to the interviewer or as defeating the manifest purpose of the situation.¹ The informant's psychological accommodation, witting or unwitting, may be to facilitate a positive response by shifting a too recent or too old incident into the period about which he is being questioned.

Such an effect is extremely systematic in its biasing of incidence estimates. Within a limited temporal range and with certain costs, a powerful control on the effect can be readily imposed by the interviewing procedure, however. This was done in the BSSR-Michigan studies by asking informants for incidents occurring in a broader time period than that used for the analysis. Lopping off the recent and distant tails, presumably, eliminates those most affected by time telescoping of the demand characteristic type.

Results of the BSSR study suggest three costs associated with this control. All involve lower total reporting of incidents in the survey.

The first cost is the use of a longer time interval, which apparently sacrifices the mnemonic advantages of having the respondent concentrate his recall efforts in time.²

The second cost of truncation is the sacrifice of some of the most recent potential data for which recall is best. This cost can be

¹Cf. analyses of the tactic of interrogators who ask long series of questions to which the reluctant informant must respond negatively or "don't know" (Biderman, 1960: 126-130).

²It is important in considering interview mnemonics to distinguish between the advantages of concentration and of recency. The latter automatically involves some of the former, but concentration by itself has advantages. Terms of everyday use such as focus, concentration and broad and narrow attention actually oversimplify the problem. A psychologically more accurate formulation would be in terms of the functions of the interview cues for establishing an appropriately organized and bounded cognitive scanning field. See Wachtel (1966).

reduced by using an eligible reference period ending as close to the date of interview as possible.

Last, there are possible consequences of the type called "output restriction" by Biderman and Reiss (1967). It is inferred that a lower-than-expected occurrence of multiple reports of victimization in previous victimization studies is due to the reduced motivation of the respondent to work further at the recall task once he has confirmed his cooperativeness, civility, importance in the interview situation etc., by having recounted one incident of victimization. It is possible that once having fulfilled the demand characteristics of the interview situation by telescoping an ineligible incident into the reference period, the respondent may be less likely to recall an eligible one in response to a subsequent incident question.

The last type of effect may be counted more as a slightly mixed blessing than as a cost, since on balance one may expect the more usual consequence of double truncation of the interview reference period to be the facilitation of the discharge of demand effect motivations in a manner which has no effect on the data.

Such purely conjectural psychological analysis can be pushed to further possible subtleties, for surely there will be considerable variation among informants in their reaction to the demand characteristics of the interview, depending upon personality, their attitude to the interviewer and the interview situation and the experiences they have had on which to draw for recall. Such variations in reactions can be discussed profitably in relation to such data as we have which bears on them, such as interviewer ratings of the "goodness" and attitude of the respondent, indexes of overall responsiveness of the interviewee, and of crime exposure.

These demand-characteristic effects presume at least moderate social intensity to the interview situation--a degree of involvement of the respondent with the interviewer (although not necessarily "rapport") that brings into play elaborate norms of social interaction and the transactional psychological responses of face-to-face interpersonal relationships. Where the social engagement of the respondent in the interview situation is very weak, the consequence of posing a long series of questions of near identical form, each of which has a high probability of eliciting a negative response, would seem to pose the hazard of creating a negative response set. Here, after having given several "no's" to the victimization check-list questions, the respondent becomes likely to give an unreflecting negative answer to subsequent ones. This is possible one reason why the BSSR tests of telephone interviewing as a victimization screener elicited a very low rate of incident mentions.

Temporal Mnemonic Effects

The second broad class of time distortions to which incident interviewing is subject includes those confusions and distortions of recall associated with the passage and accumulation of experiences by the person through time. Some of these distortions have known (albeit extremely imperfectly known) effects. Of these, the simplest is the principle of the "forgetting curve." Although simple knowledge of the existence of the principle by itself is sufficient to suggest certain design safeguards, including those already discussed, there is little basis external to the specific data at hand for even grossly estimating the parameters of the forgetting curves applicable to these data. Nor can they be readily estimated directly from these data. This is the

case (a) because recency operates concomitantly with other mnemonic influences and is known from psychological experimentation to interact with some of these factors, such as primacy, and (b) because the parameters of the "true" distribution of incidents by time are unknown.

So far, the best recourse for determining the effects of recency is by applying the victimization survey interview procedures to a population of known victims. A study of this type is currently being planned by the Census Bureau. For a procedure which has as its primary justification the study of unreported crime, however, results from a population of known reports by (therefore) known reporters has patent deficiencies.

Other temporal distortions are of kinds which we cannot readily assign to patterning principles and which we therefore treat as random. Psychological knowledge of memory is too scant to be of much use (Weiner, 1966). Operating autonomously, the memory of a person is subject to a great variety of misassociations, of selective and distorting influences--false cueing, motivated forgetting, etc. The specific cues employed by the interviewer in applying his schedule and instructions are extremely rudimentary triggers and guideposts to these elaborate mental processes of the subject. But these cues can add sources of confusion and distortion as well, particularly to the extent that they burden and distract from the mental work of recall by presenting demands for difficult translations from the terms in which questions are put into those in which the events to be recalled were experienced and are "encoded" in memory (cf. Melton, 1963). Presumably, again, the better and more specific the match between the categories and terms used in the questions and the manner in

which recall of such events tends to be symbolically structured, the less will be the temporal distortion in the interview data.

Many mnemonic devices can be employed in interview design to reduce the temporal and other distortions in victimization. A few of them were tested and found effective in the BSSR - Michigan studies. These included the use of anchoring points for the temporal reference period that also order experience and the round of life ("since New Year's Day," "since Labor Day"). Also effective was keeping the attention of the respondent on the interval scanning task, rather than shifting between this scanning and remembering details of an incident at a specific point in time, as was done in the initial Washington pilot study. We suspect that patience on the part of the interviewer and his sustaining a flow of thought which allowed the respondent to get into the right "mental gear" for the recall task also appear to pay off in better recall--that victimization screening ideally should be allotted generous interview time. Specific screening questions work much better than do general ones. But the specificity has to be with regard to the experience of the person, not with regard to analytical or legal distinctions among crime categories.

Some dilemma remains, however, in that the more elaborate, lengthy, specific, and numerous are the devices used to overcome the temporal mnemonic effects, the greater the hazard courted of producing demand characteristic effects.

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