Effects of the Implementation of 'Forced Answering' within Online Surveys on Response Rates and Validity of Answers

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Abstract:

Due to the low costs and the ability to reach many people in a short time, online-surveys have become an important resource of data for research. As a result, many non-professionals gather their data through online questionnaires, which are often of low quality or operationalised poorly. A popular example for this is the 'forced-response-option', whose impact will be analysed within this research-project.

The forced-response-option is commonly described as a possibility to force the respondent to give an answer to each question that is asked. In most of the online-survey computer software, it is easily achieved by enabling a checkbox.

There has been a tremendous increase in the use of this option, however, the inquirers are often not aware of possible consequences. In software-manuals, this option is praised as a strategy that reduces item-non-response.

In contrast, authors offer many doubts that counter this strategy. They base on the assumption that respondents typically have plausible reasons for not answering a question (not understanding; absence of appropriate categories; privacy).

Our thesis is that forcing the respondents to select an answer might cause two scenarios:

- Increasing unit-non-response/dropout-rates.

- Decreasing validity of the answers (lying/random answers).

To analyse the consequences of the implementation of forced-response-option, we use split-ballot-field-experiments. We especially focus on dropout-rates and response behaviour. Our first split-ballot-experiment was carried out last July (n=1056) and we plan a second experiment for March, so that we will be able to present our results based on strong data evidence.

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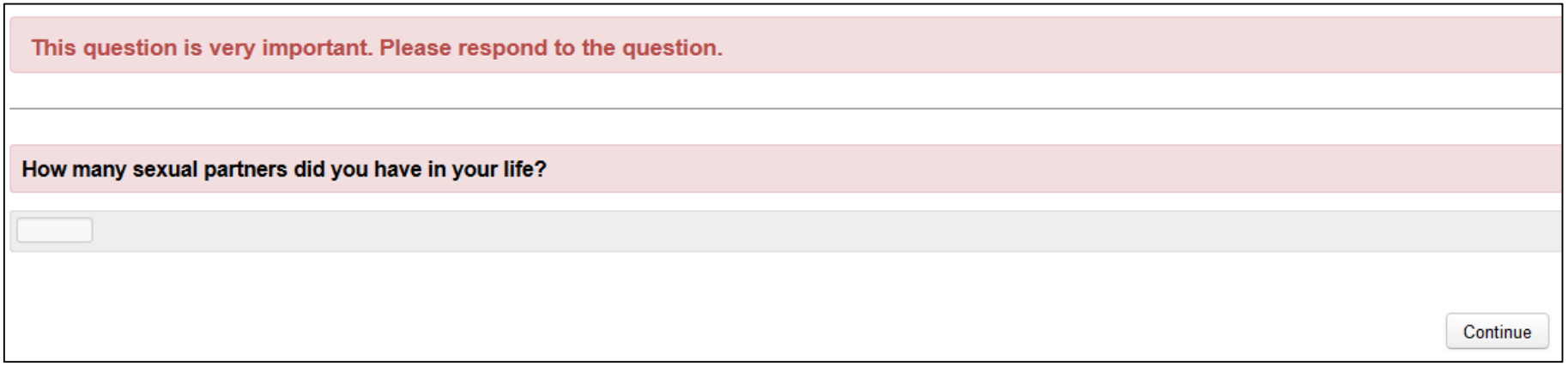
RN21: Quantitative Methods: Web Surveys and Missing Data

Funded by:

The forced answering-option

The forced answering (or forced response) option is to force the respondent to answer or enter an appropriate response to each question to see the next question and proceed through the entire questionnaire.



State of the art

Effects of FA on different quality parameters:

- Decrease of item-nonresponse (Albaum et al., 2010, 2011; Roster et al., 2014)
- Inconclusive results for FA on dropouts
  - No effects on dropouts (Albaum et al., 2010, 2011; Roster et al., 2014)
  - Higher dropouts (O'Neil, Penrod & Bornstein 2003; Stieger et al. 2007)
  - Earlier dropouts (Décieux et al., 2015a; Mergener et al., 2015)
- No study that addresses the effect on the validity of answers

Reactance as consequence of forced answering

The Reactance effect:

- Reactance appears when an individual's freedom is threatened and cannot be directly restored (Brehm 1966).
- FA could be experienced as a loss of freedom.
- The respondent is denied the choice to let a question unanswered resulting in an internal pressure to disclose information that (s)he actually does not want to offer.
- This may be felt strongly especially when sensitive or personal topics are concerned.

Present study

Hypothesis 1: Forcing respondents to answer all questions results in increased unit nonresponse rates.

Hypothesis 2: Forcing respondents to answer all questions results in decreased data validity (through random answers or faking of answers).

Hypothesis 3: Offering a “prefer not to answer” (PNA) category weakens the effects of Hypothesis 1 and 2.

Participants, survey design and issues

Sample overview:

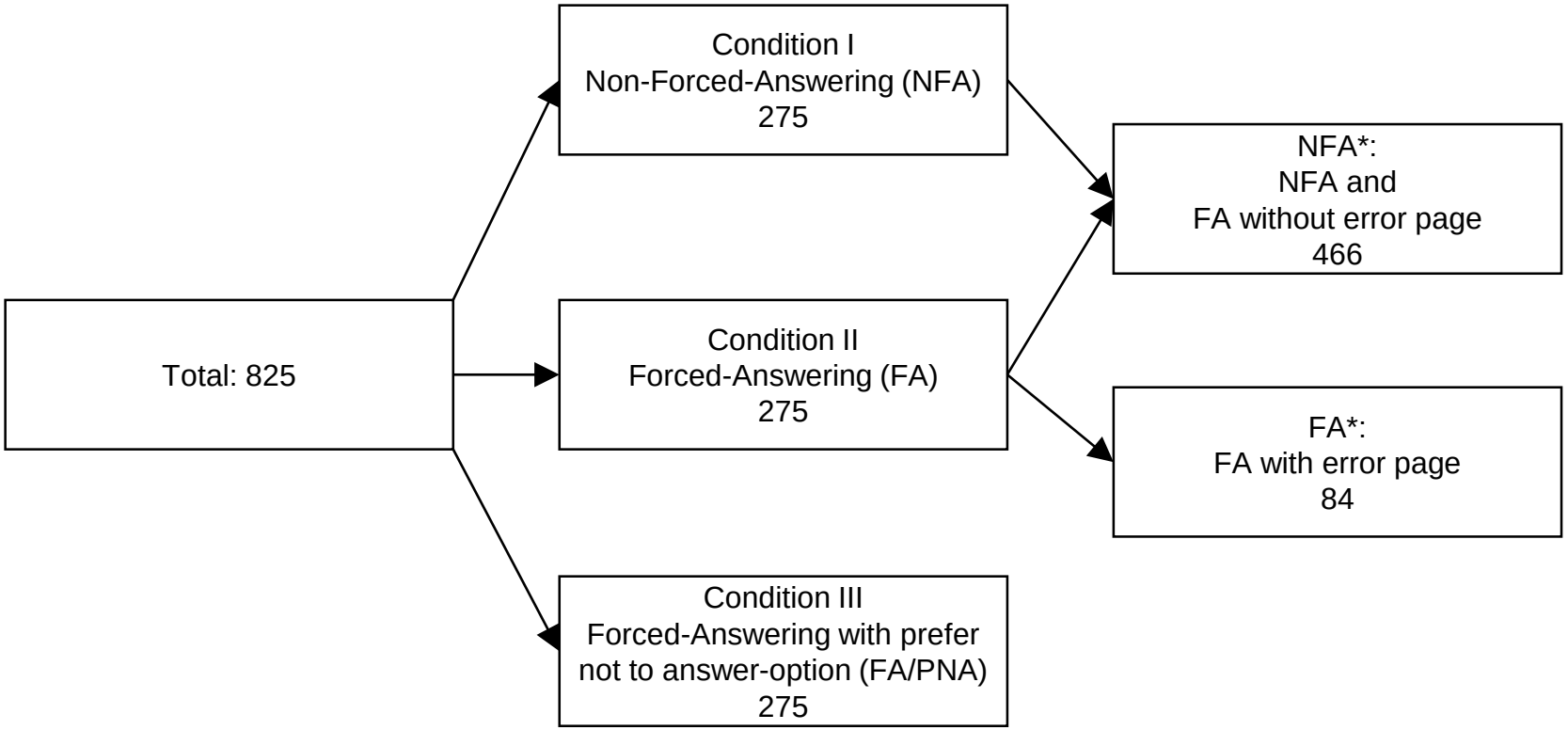
- Students at two German universities (contacted via e-mail)
- N=825
- M=25 years, SD=4.3; 52% women

Survey design:

- Topic: partnership and sexuality
- About 100 items with different types of response formats
- Anonymity was assured; no incenctives were offered
- Randomly assigned across three different experimental conditions (NFA, FA, FA/PNA)
- Attempts of skipping a question were logged

Research design

Figure 1: Research design



Measures

- Instructed response items:
  - Example item: “We want to test your attention, please click the answer category ‘partially agree’”
- Self-reported faking:
  - “Within this survey we asked some questions, that many people would value as very private and highly sensitive. A common reaction to this is that people do not answer honestly. Therefore, we would like to know: How many questions did you not answer honestly?”
- Self-reported sensitivity
- Self-reported attention
- Self-reported interest

Results (I)

Table 1: Dropouts, attempt to skip and faking by different conditions (percentages)

	condition I (NFA)	condition II (FA)	condition III (FA/PNA)	Total	Cramer's V
Attempt to skip	29.5	30.5	13.1	24.4	.186***
Instr. Resp. (wrong)	14.1	10.7	12.8	12.5	.042
Faking	21.5	22.6	14.7	19.5	.089*
Dropouts	25.1	28.4	23.6	25.7	.045

*Note. *p< 0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01.*

Results (II)

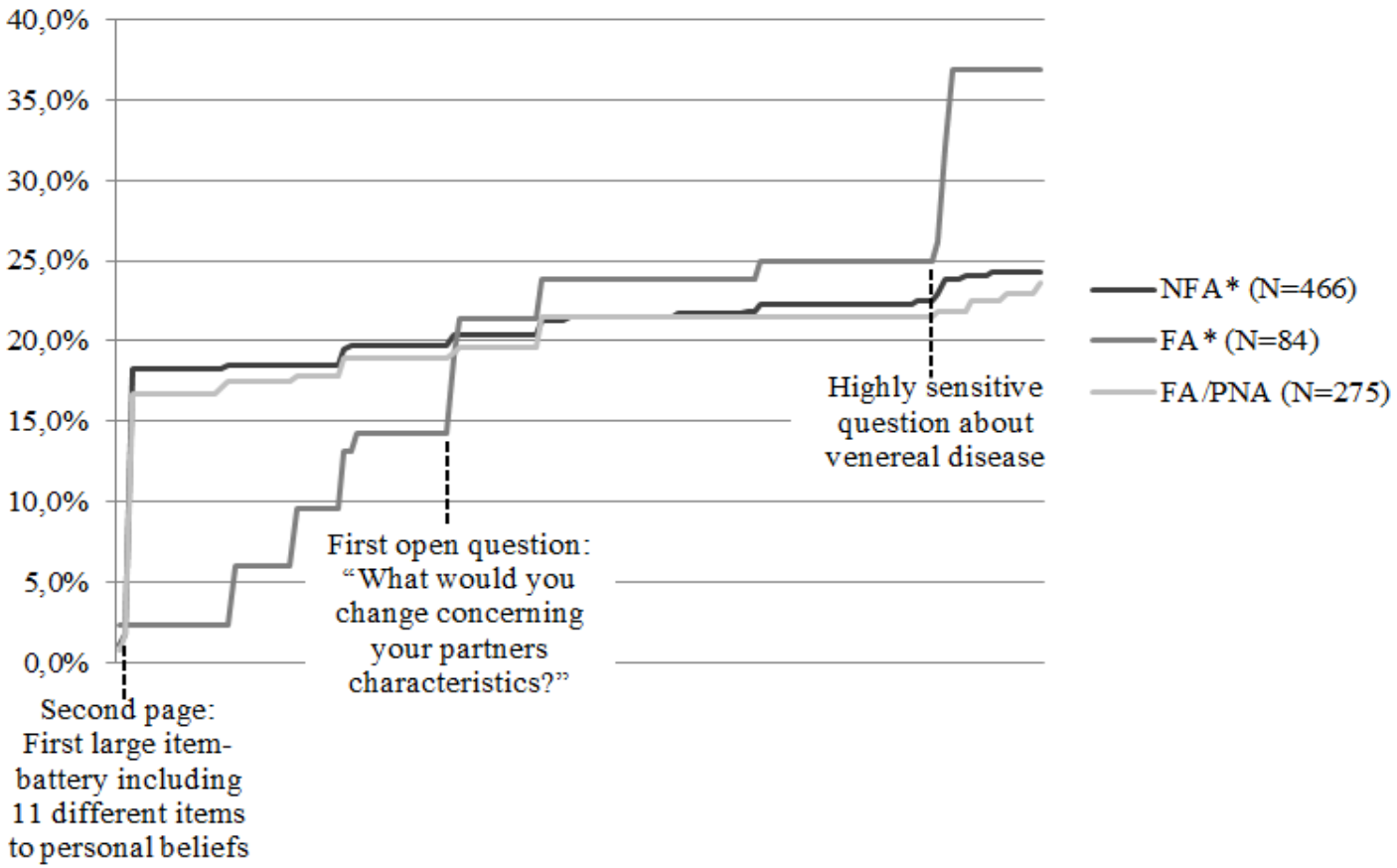
Table 2: Dropouts, attempt to skip and faking by different groups (percentages)

	NFA*	FA*	FA/PNA	Total	Cramer's V
Instr. Resp. (wrong)	13.1	8.0	12.8	12.5	.043
Faking	21.7	24.5	14.7	19.5	.090*
Dropouts	24.9	36.9	23.6	25.7	.087**

*Note. *p< 0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01.*

Results (III)

Figure 2: Dropout-process by different groups



Summary & Conclusion

- Only one third of the forced answering sub sample has actually been forced
- FA produces higher („bad“) dropout (H1)
- FA produces a higher percentage of invalid answers
  - No effects for the Instructed Response items (H2)
  - Significant higher percentage of fakers in the FA-condition (H2)
- PNA-category weakens the negative effects of the FA-condition (H3)

Article submitted

- Décieux, J. P., Mergener, A., & Neufang, K. & Sischka, P. (2015b). Implementation of the forced answering option within online surveys: Higher response rates at the expense of validity? *Submitted.*

Thank you for your attention!

Literature

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