RESEARCH NOTE

Surveying Societies Mired in Conflict: Evidence of Social Desirability Bias in Palestine

Oded Adomi Leshem¹, Ismail Nooraddini², and James C. Witte²

¹School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution; ²Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Institute for Immigration Research, Center for Social Science Research, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA

Introduction

Survey research is a form of social interaction with its own set of guiding principles. As in all social interactions, there are implicit cultural and political values and beliefs that can influence the way respondents choose to answer survey questions. Previous research within the United States has found that the presence of an interviewer can influence the validity of survey responses (e.g., Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinki, 2000). Similar findings have been found cross-culturally (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2016). While there has been an abundant amount of research on interviewer effects in and outside the United States, little research has examined social desirability bias (SDB) in the context of an ethnonational conflict, and specifically among populations struggling for self-determination. In this research note, we examine the effect of SDB by showing the specific ways survey mode (interviewer-administered vs. self-administered) affects responses among Palestinians immersed in a prolonged conflict and a struggle for political independence.

Survey as a Form of Social Interaction and SDB

Sudman and Bradburn (1974) conceptualized the survey interview process as a micro-social system consisting of two roles, the interviewer and the respondent. Under this

All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Oded Adomi Leshem, PhD, School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, 4400 University Dr., Fairfax, VA 22030, USA. E-mail: oleshem@gmu.edu
framework, completing the interview is perceived as a common task around which the actors interact. Later research recognized the broader cultural context (Schwarz, 2007; Sudman, Bradburn, & Schwarz, 1996). As in all social interactions, implicit beliefs and rules influence the way people respond to survey questions. The inherent social nature of the interaction can lead respondents to take culturally and politically infused social norms into account when answering particularly sensitive survey questions (Middleton & Jones, 2000). One of the direct results of the normative nature of the survey interaction is the intentional or unintentional biasing of responses so that the answers will not violate social norms that are considered part of the societal consensus.

Biasing answers to align with expected societal beliefs is even more likely when social cohesion is expected from members of the society. Prolonged intergroup conflict is one situation when social cohesion is expected of group members. Shamir and Shikaki (2005), who study the role of public opinion in the Israeli and Palestinian societies, point to the normative facet of public opinion during violent ethnonational conflicts. In these intense sociopolitical contexts, public opinion can be understood as a “social force that functions to achieve cohesion and value consensus in society. From this point of view, public opinion is the normative opinion, that is, that perceived as the majority opinion that can apply social sanctions” (Shamir & Shikaki, 2005, p. 313). It follows that, when surveying populations mired in conflict, responses about issues at the heart of the national consensus are inclined to be influenced by what is perceived to be appropriate and desirable by the society.

SDB in survey methodology is the tendency for participants to distort their answer to a survey question so that the answer appears more socially acceptable (Krumpal, 2013). Important determinants of socially desirable behaviors are popular societal beliefs, as they determine what constitutes a good impression in a given situation (Nederhof, 1985). According to Paulhus and Reid (1991), impression management is one of the reasons people may edit their answers, deliberately or unintentionally, in a socially desirable way. As part of impression management, one might misrepresent aspects of one’s attitudes, values, or beliefs in order to influence the judgment of one’s self by others.

Traditionally, research has examined interviewer effects and SDB through two modes of administration: interviewer- and self-administered questionnaires (Liu & Wang, 2016). While the two modes of administration differ in a number of ways (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2008, 2014), one key distinction is that in interviewer-administered mode, the respondent is actively sharing her or his opinions with the interviewer. Numerous studies demonstrated that SDB effects are highest when an interviewer administers the questionnaire (Atkeson, Adams, & Alvarez, 2014; Kreuter, Presser, & Tourangeau, 2008; Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinki, 2000). This may be because the social nature of the interviewer-administered survey means there are more instances where social norms are evoked (Dillman et al., 2014). More specifically, an interviewer-administered questionnaire raises the concern of the respondent that her or his answers may be met with disapproval, leading respondents to provide more socially favorable responses.

Conversely, self-administered questionnaires afford respondents greater privacy, reducing potential socially desirable bias (Atkeson et al., 2014). In other words, when a questionnaire is self-administered, respondents may be less prone to bias their answers to fit what they perceive is socially acceptable. While self-administered surveys can reduce SDB, there are also some disadvantages of self-administration. For example,
semiliterate respondents might be concerned about understanding the questions and may be reluctant to fill out the questionnaire on their own. They might also feel ashamed to admit their condition and complete the questionnaire without fully understanding the questions. Others may, deliberately or not, skip questions or mark their answers in an unclear way. For these and other reasons, polls in the Occupied Palestinian Territories have traditionally been administered by the interviewer in face-to-face interaction.

The Israel-Palestine Conflict and the Palestinian Struggle for Independence

The Jewish national movement and Palestinian nationalism have been clashing over the same land and the right to statehood, justice, and self-determination for 100 years (see: Caplan, 2009; Dowty, 2005; Morris, 2001; Wasserstein, 2004). The conflict constitutes a prototypical case of an intractable conflict (Coleman, 2004), which is characterized “by the persistence of a vicious cycle of violence in which worldviews feed the courses of violent actions, and these, in turn, strengthen the worldviews” (Bar-Tal, Halperin, Sharvit, & Zafran, 2012, p. 41). Due to the reoccurring outbreaks of violence, intractable conflicts demand vast material and psychological investments from the involved societies (Leshem, Klar, & Flores, 2016). To cope with the ongoing violence and hostilities, society members develop a rigid psychological infrastructure that dictates what conflict-related narratives and beliefs are socially accepted (Bar-Tal et al., 2012; Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011; Paez & Liu, 2011). The psychological infrastructure prescribes what group members ought to think about the rival society, their own society, and the nature of the conflict. Theses dogmatic narratives and beliefs provide a coherent and predictable picture of the conflict and facilitate the mobilization of the societies toward conflict (Bar-Tal et al., 2012). Due to the functional nature of the psychological infrastructure, societies make special efforts to impart and maintain cohesive narratives and beliefs through socialization and interaction (Bar-Tal, 2013).

From the Palestinian side, the conflict takes on a further distinctive feature. The Palestinians, unlike the Israelis, are in the midst of a prolonged struggle for political independence and statehood. Societies engaged in an ongoing struggle for independence need to mobilize the entire population for the struggle. For this to happen, the society needs to “rally around the flag” and create a set of beliefs adopted by the whole community (Baker & Oneal, 2001). Some of these beliefs, like the unbreakable connection between the people and the land and the righteousness of the national struggle for self-determination, become core pillars of the national identity. It is thus expected that societal members adhere to ideas and beliefs considered cardinal for the collective’s struggle for independence. It should be noted that survey research conducted in the Occupied Palestinian Territories show that Palestinians’ opinions on conflict-related issues are diverse (Maoz & Shikaki, 2014; Shamir & Shikaki, 2002). However, social cohesiveness deems that fundamental issues such as the justness of the struggle should be regarded as unquestionable by members of the society.

It is within this context that a concern regarding the likelihood of SDB should be raised among surveyors of the Palestinian and Israeli societies and other groups embroiled in protracted conflict. Given the social expectations for cohesion, it becomes probable that when interviewed by a fellow group member, participants who are asked...
about issues within the national consensus will provide answers consistent with that consensus. One way to minimize (though probably not eliminate) the effects of SDB is to ask respondents to fill out the questionnaire by themselves. In this way, participants are not openly sharing their opinions with the interviewer and thus may feel freer to express ideas that are not in complete alignment with the social consensus. It could, therefore, be postulated that SDB effects will be more pronounced when the participant is sharing her or his answers with the interviewer compared to when the participant is filling in the answers more privately.

Present Research

In the present study, we used two modes of administration to test the magnitude of SDB effects in the context of a highly mobilized society struggling for self-determination. The observations reported here are a part of a more extensive study investigating political attitudes among Israelis and Palestinians. During the design of the study, a concern was raised that participants from the Palestinian sample, which was planned to be surveyed using face-to-face interviewing, might bias their responses on specific questions to align with the national consensus. To account for potential SDB, we decided to use self-administered surveying in half of the sample. We postulated that respondents would answer questions about issues inherent to the consensus in a manner that is considered politically appropriate when a fellow Palestinian interviewer administers the survey but not when the survey is self-administered. We hypothesized that mode of administration would not affect answers to conflict-related questions that are only loosely tied to the national consensus.

Methodology

Sampling

The survey was administered to 500 Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The sample was obtained using a four-stage, stratified, simple random sampling. The sampling frame used was an electronic list of all the localities in Palestinian Territories, as defined by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). The four-stage sample approach included the (1) Area Primary Sampling Unit (PSU); (2) Enumeration Area Secondary Sampling Unit (SSU); (3) Household; and (4) Person. Once the interviewer arrived at the select PSU or the neighborhood, they moved onto the selected census block as defined by PCBS. Houses were selected according to a sampling interval, which consisted of one out of every 10 households in every enumeration area of 100 houses. When inside the household, researchers used a Kish table to determine which person in the house to interview. Over half of the surveys were administered in the West Bank (62.5%), while the remaining respondents were

1 The large-scale study focused on Israelis’ and Palestinians’ perceptions of the future. Apart from the variables discussed in this article, there were 45 questions gauging participants’ attitudes and emotions about the future of peace and conflict. For example, participants were asked about the levels of threat they feel when they think about the future, the intensity of their wish for future peace, and their assessments of the levels of hope for peace among the adversary.
from the Gaza Strip (37.5%). In the sample, 49.8% were males. The sampling approach yielded +/- 4.8% margin error at a 95% confidence interval ($p = .05$).

Methods

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire about their attitudes toward the conflict with Israel. Surveys were conducted in participants’ homes by a Palestinian interviewer and were administered in one of two ways: interviewer-administered or self-administered. As mentioned, surveys in the occupied Palestinian territories are traditionally interviewer-administered. In this mode of administration, the researcher asks the questions and marks the respondent’s answers on the questionnaire sheet. Interviewer-administered surveys decrease the number of skipped questions and increase the certainty that the respondent understands the questions. However, as previously discussed, because the participants are sharing their opinions with the interviewer, interviewer-administered surveys may elicit, at least potentially, SDB. To account for the effects of the potential bias, in half of the occasions, the interviewer gave the participant the questionnaire sheet and asked her or him to fill it out on their own. The interviewer stayed in the premises to make sure participants were completing the surveys by themselves, but she or he was instructed to keep a distance from the participant and give her or him full privacy. The mode of administration was randomized so that about half of the interviews were done in the traditional interviewer-administered method ($N = 260$) and approximately half in the self-administered method ($N = 240$).

Measures

For the purpose of this research note, we focus on two measures that are tied to salient issues within the national consensus regarding the Palestinian struggle for independence. The two measures (Adherence to the Ethos of Conflict and Willingness to Collaborate with Israelis on Peacebuilding Initiatives) were hypothesized to be affected by the mode of administration. We also report on two measures that are politically charged, but are not inherent to the consensus. These measures were not postulated to be influenced by the mode of administration.

**Adherence to the Ethos of Conflict.** The Ethos of Conflict Scale was constructed by Bar-Tal and colleagues to capture conflict-related beliefs that are core to the national narratives of the Israeli and Palestinian societies (Bar-Tal et al., 2012). Defined as the “basis for the hegemonic social consciousness” of groups mired in intractable conflicts, the scale captures group members’ fundamental beliefs about the conflict, like their beliefs in the righteousness of the national causes, their distrust in the “enemy,” and their willingness to injure the enemy in times of threat. Past studies showed high adherence to the Ethos of Conflict (EOC) among Israelis and Palestinians (Bar–Tal, Raviv, Raviv, & Dgani-Hirsh, 2009; Canetti, Elad-Strenger, Lavi, Guy, & Bar–Tal, 2015; Lavi, Canetti, Sharvit, Bar–Tal, & Hobfoll, 2014). The four-item scale, adapted from Canetti et al. (2015) ($H = .733$), 2 included

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2 A conventional threshold deemed adequate to confirm reliability for an $H$ statistic is .70 (Hancock & Mueller, 2001).
items such as “The Palestinians have an exclusive claim to the land of Palestine as it has been their homeland for generations” (see Supplementary appendix for all items). The scale was hypothesized to be affected by the mode of administration such that those completing the survey face-to-face will feel compelled to exhibit higher adherence to the Ethos of Conflict compared to participants answering the questions on their own.

**Willingness to collaborate with Israelis on peacebuilding initiatives.** Two items assessed participants’ willingness to collaborate with Israelis on peacebuilding initiatives \((H = .887)\). The objection to any collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians has become increasingly popular in the last two decades (Barakat & Goldenblatt, 2012; Tamari, 2013). The opposition to collaborate with Israelis, including on initiatives that promote peace, is based on the fear of many Palestinians that any collaboration with Israelis normalizes the continuing state of occupation and oppression of the Palestinians. In the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, “Normalization” (Tatbi’a in Arabic) has been defined as “the process of building open and reciprocal relations with Israel in all fields, including the political, economic, social, cultural, educational, legal, and security fields.” (Salem, 2005, p. 100). The vocal objection of any collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians has become increasingly popular in the last two decades (Barakat & Goldenblatt, 2012; Tamari, 2013). By and large, normalization is regarded by Palestinians as something all Palestinians should avoid. We thus postulated that respondents would exhibit lower willingness to work with Israelis toward peace when a fellow Palestinian pollster is aware of respondent’s views, compared to when the questionnaire is self-administered.

As noted, we also report on two other factors that were not hypothesized to be affected by the mode of administration.

**Expectations for Peace.** Four items adapted from Leshem (2017) tapped respondents’ expectations that peace between Israelis and Palestinians will materialize \((H = .879)\). Participants were asked to rate the feasibility of four types of peace (see Supplementary appendix). In the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, expectations for peace are politically controversial (Leshem, 2018) but are not part and parcel of the national consensus and are therefore less susceptible to be affected by mode of administration.

**Frequency of Thinking About Peace.** Two items gauged respondents’ self-reported frequency of thoughts about future peace \((H = .858)\). The scale ranged from “I never think about peace” to “I think about peace very often.” Thinking about future peace is conceptually tied to the conflict but is not an inherent part of the societal consensus and thus was not hypothesized to be influenced by the mode of administration.

**Results**

A two sample t-test demonstrate that, as hypothesized, respondents expressed less willingness to collaborate with Israelis toward peace in interviewer-administered mode, than self-administered mode \((t = 2.18, \ p = 0.03)\). Similarly, respondents showed more adherence to the ethos of conflict when an interviewer administered the questionnaire compared to when the questionnaire was self-administered \((t = -1.74, \ p = 0.08)\).
$p = 0.08$), though the effect was marginally significant. As postulated, mode of administration did not affect participants’ answers on issues that are not deeply embedded in the social consensus, like expectations for peace ($t = 0.92, p = 0.36$) and frequency of thinking about peace ($t = 0.87, p = 0.39$). Overall, results indicate that respondents were affected by the mode of administration only when answering questions directly related to the national consensus on the Palestinian struggle. The moderate size effects are in line with results from previous studies on interviewer effects (see: Flores-Macias & Lawson, 2008; West & Blom, 2016).

As previously noted, the modes of administration were randomized such that half were done in the traditional interviewer-administered survey method and the other half using self-administration. However, a few participants felt uncomfortable filling out the questionnaire themselves and asked to complete the survey in the traditional interviewer-administered survey mode. To maintain a smooth implementation of the survey, this was allowed. A logistic regression revealed that levels of education and income affected participants’ inclination to request to complete the survey in the traditional interviewer-administered mode. To account for potential confounding effects these factors might have had, we ran additional ANCOVA models controlling for respondents’ education and income. Table 1 displays the impact that the mode administration had on all indices before (model 1) and after (model 2) we control for respondents’ income and education. Results indicate that the effects of mode of administration still hold, and even increased, after controlling for potential confounding variables (Adherence to the Ethos of Conflict, $b = 0.13$, Standard Error (SE) = 0.06, $p = 0.04$; Willingness to Collaborate with Israelis on Peacebuilding Initiatives, $b = -0.27$, SE = 0.12, $p = 0.03$). As speculated, other variables were not affected by the mode of administration. These findings indicate that the mode of administration was indeed the factor influencing respondents’ answers on our dependent variables.

## Conclusion

Our research provides evidence that the effect of SDB was present during an interviewer-administered survey. In instances where the survey questions did not touch matters at the heart of the consensus, the mode of survey administration had no significant effect on participants’ answers. However, the mode of administration did affect participants’ answers on issues essential to national consensus. Respondents exhibited more adherence to the ethos of conflict when a Palestinian interviewer administered the survey, compared to instances where the survey was self-administered. Similarly, respondents were less willing to collaborate with Israelis when interviewed by a Palestinian interviewer, compared to instances where they completed the survey themselves. Effects increased after controlling for potential confounding variables. Though the effects we found are modest, this is consistent with other findings

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3 There was no significant effect of mode of administration on any other variable gauged in the study, except the variables that were postulated to be influenced by SDB.

4 To obtain information on income, respondents were asked if they earn less than average, average, or more than average.

5 Trends remain when the demographic variables are inserted in the models as categorical variables.
on interviewer effects (Flores-Macias & Lawson, 2008; West & Blom, 2016) and continue to add to the existing body of literature on interviewer effects and SDB. It is important to note that past research did not provide distinct groupings of issues that are either within or outside the Palestinian national consensus. This imposes a limitation on our study, one that will hopefully be rectified by further exploration.

Examining interviewer effects and SDB in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provides further evidence for the complexity of surveying in intense political settings. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, some questions provoked SDB effects, while others did not. One conclusion is that given the potential for SDB one should always rely on self-administered instruments. However, this approach would mean forgoing the advantages that interviewer-administered surveys have in some settings. Face-to-face interviews decrease the number of skipped questions and increase the certainty that the respondent comprehended the questions. The lesson, instead, is that researchers should carefully consider the extent to which the survey content may be at the heart of the consensus given the specific cultural context of the

Table 1
Impact of Survey Administration on Select Composites Before (model 1) and After (model 2) Controlling for Education and Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequency of thinking about peace</th>
<th>Expectations for peace</th>
<th>Adherence to the ethos of conflict</th>
<th>Willingness to work with Israelis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>-0.09 (0.10)</td>
<td>-0.11 (0.12)</td>
<td>0.11* (0.06)</td>
<td>-0.26** (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education More than High School</td>
<td>-0.12 (0.15)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.13 (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.31 (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Less than Average</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.13)</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.17** (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.10 (0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.49*** (0.07)</td>
<td>2.78*** (0.08)</td>
<td>2.80*** (0.12)</td>
<td>4.08*** (0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Ordinal Least Square (OLS) coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis.

*p < .10   **p < .05   ***p < .01 (two-tailed).
survey setting and the dominant psychological infrastructure of the likely respondents, and then choose the appropriate survey mode. When possible, we recommend randomizing between surveying methods, to test for, account for, and minimize undesired biases.

**Supplementary Data**

Supplementary Data are available at *IJPOR* online.

**References**


**Biographical Notes**

**Oded Adomi Leshem** is a visiting scholar at the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University.

**Ismail Nooraddini** is a PhD student in the Sociology and Anthropology Department at George Mason University and a graduate research assistant for the Institute for Immigration Research.

**James C. Witte** is a Sociology professor in the Sociology and Anthropology Department at George Mason University, and the director for the Institute for Immigration Research and Center for Social Science Research.