Validity Criticisms

Data issues in work and family policy research

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Abstract

This article addresses a debate about use of attitude data by several Australian public policy researchers. In 2001, Belinda Probert and John Murphy published a critique of claims made by two other Australian social scientists on policy initiatives for parents of young children. At the core of that critique were a series of concerns about use of attitudinal data to support a public policy argument. These concerns centre on the meaning of a question and response options from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes. This article uses new data from qualitative question testing to discuss the extent to which the survey question is appropriate to address the question asked by researchers. It describes a question testing project which investigated interpretation of this question and the meaning within responses, to provide an assessment of the validity and appropriateness of the question and the data it generates.

Key words

validity, work and family, paid work, parents, mothers, use of data,
Majority Opinion or Divided Selves?

In September 2001, an article by Jonathan Evans and Mariah Kelley in People and Place (Evans and Kelley 2001) made a range of public policy arguments about support for families with young children, one of which was based on their assertion that Australian mothers preferred not to work when their children were pre-school aged. They supported that claim with data from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, specifically, one question, which is worded, “Do you think women should work outside the home full-time, part-time or not at all when there are children under six?”. Evans and Kelley use a subset of Australians who are mothers and data from the 2001, and AuSSA shows a majority of these respondents select the response, “stay at home”.

Figure 1 here

Evans and Kelley characterized these responses by Australian mothers as “moral views on ideal activity patterns” when there are pre-school aged children.

In December, Belinda Probert and John Murphy, again in People and Place (Probert and Murphy 2001), responded with a range of criticisms including of Evans and Kelley’s use of this data to support their assertion. Probert and Murphy made a range of criticisms of the question used in the survey to collect the data as well as Evan’s and Kelley’s assumptions about the responses. Their criticisms were threefold. Firstly, that the question is “explicitly normative”- it asks too generally what respondents think the best thing to do is, rather than asking for their own preferences, as Evans and Kelley assume. Secondly, that the question cannot capture the
complexity of influences on decisions of mothers whether to work, which come from gender roles, social policies, available work, and thirdly, that responses to the question may reflect a range of different interpretations and meanings.

**The Question Under Discussion**

This paper examines one question from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, which collects the Australian data for the International Social Survey Program. It was most recently fielded in Australia in 2005.

The question under discussion in this paper is “Do you think women should work outside the home full-time, part-time, or not at all, when they have a child under six?”

**Key Assumptions**

For the purpose of this analysis, this section identifies a group of key assumptions made by authors of both papers. For Evans and Kelley, a key assumption is that responses represent “moral” views. Their broader claim is that the question is “explicitly a moral one about ideals, about what is best, about what people ought to be doing” (Evans and Kelley 2001). They interpret the question as one of whether respondents are “inclined to think mothers should stay home when they have young children” (p 30).

For Probert and Murphy, the key criticism about the question in this context is that the question is normative. That is, it asks what *should* be done. Evans and Kelley do indeed seem to treat the question as a normative one but the problem according to Probert and Murphy is that they draw from the data a conclusion on what mothers *want* to do. Evans and Kelley describe the
attitudes measured by the question in various terms including as “preferences” (Evans and Kelley 2001, p32), and what women “favour” (p 29). They describe the question as asking “women what they actually want to do” (p 29). So, do respondents answer in moral or normative terms? That is, do their responses represent their opinion on what mothers ought to, or should, do? And, in their answers, are respondents also nominating what women prefer or choose?

The second key issue for Probert and Murphy is that qualitative research provides a different picture of what Australians think to the interpretation of this survey question. Decisions about work and care, according to qualitative research carried out by Probert and Murphy, are complex and difficult, and a single question cannot take into account that complexity. The question here is whether respondents recognize this complexity when providing their answers to a survey question. Does the survey data reflect respondent choice of the “right” answer? Or are there some qualifications, assumptions or conditions which are attached to respondents’ attitudes which is lost in the data?

**My Study**

The data discussed below presents detailed views on this question from respondents. It was collected in Melbourne, Australia, from a small group of respondents during interviews on a group of survey questions. The study uses a protocol called expansive interviewing, from Willis (Willis 2005). It is derived from, and uses elements of, cognitive interviewing, which is primarily a tool for questionnaire testing. Question testing is one of the goals of this study but it is apparent that many of the issues which arise from this question under discussion neither emerge directly from the question wording, nor are cognitive in nature.
Expansive interviewing is described by Rothgeb and others (Rothgeb, Willis et al. 2001) as “a means to extend our understanding of the phenomenon under study, and the way in which the survey questions we are testing address that phenomenon” (in Willis, 2005, p 103). I interviewed 14 adults, aged between 18 and 72, eight of whom were women.

During these interviews, I presented six test questions and their response options to respondents, and asked them to nominate a response from the response options available, and to “think aloud” their reasoning of their response.

The Rationale

The aim of this and other qualitative studies testing questions used in survey research is to capture some of the variation in meaning for respondents to survey questions. As Willis (2005) writes, “statisticians strive to minimize (error) variance, whereas cognitive interviewers maximize (subject) variance.” (p 227). The sample size used here is far too small to estimate the prevalence of attitudes and meanings in the population but the aim here is to investigate the breadth of meaning in the population.

Respondents

Evans and Kelley used, in their analysis, data from a subset of respondents who were mothers themselves. Their rationale is that data from this question shows what women want for themselves; that the question asks “women what they actually want to do” (29). This is an awkward assumption, especially given the presumption that the question is normative. The logic of this difficulty is thus. The question is asked of all adults in the sample in each country where the survey is used. The wording is the same for women with children, aged under six, or not.
Respondents with no children can only answer based on their beliefs on what others should do, as can fathers. Likewise for mothers with children who are not aged under six. Evans and Kelley used this group in their sub-sample in order to obtain a sample of sufficient size to bear analysis. For Evans and Kelley’s assumptions that responses for mothers with children are a reflection of what they want or prefer to do, women with children would have to interpret the question differently to other adults. Data from all adults in response to this question would include responses which were attitudes to what others should do as well as responses which reflected what ones’ own preferences were. If this were the case it could be a serious challenge to the validity of the question which requires more investigation.

While this potential problem is interesting it is not the focus of this paper. As well as providing an important critique of the specific use of the data by Evans and Kelley, the concerns identified by Probert and Murphy are important in themselves as they are relevant to all uses of the data generated by the question. This study uses qualitative data from adult Australians, some of whom are mothers (and fathers). The study does not tell us what mothers think or how mothers interpret the question but we can draw from it some information about how the question is interpreted. These results are important for all uses of the data and interesting for the specific use it is put to by Evans and Kelley.

**Responses on normative or moral grounds**

Respondents recognized the suggestion of a normative judgment in the question. Some provided responses which included words like, “it would be best”, or “should”, and some referred to what was best for children. Many respondents, though, rejected the normative element
of the question. Some emphasized that they could not make a statement that applied to all mothers.

With this question, I think of the word, “should”, and should according to whom? Really? I think women should do whatever they want to do, if they could. Ummm……when there is a child under school age, there are some women who would want to stay at home to look after children, there are some other women who probably can’t stand staying home full time. So, making a general statement applying to all women, I think, is quite difficult.

I would choose the box that says, that after the parents have discussed……and they’ve discussed all the factors, the child’s’ care, financial, everything, that they would be able to choose from one of those (laughing).

Some explicitly interpreted from the question a request that they provide a normative judgment, and rejected that request.

(R reads question) ..”Work full time, work part time, stay at home” .., but there’s this other box that it’s ok to choose any one of them, and also I the thing that I think I struggle with is the notion is that…. I think where this (question) leads me to think, is that when you have a preschool child, there’s only one choice, and that you are either a working mother, or you are…just work part time or that you are a stay at home mum.

This respondent is saying that the question suggests that there is a “best choice” for mothers with preschool aged children, but that in practice there is not.

**Conditionality**

Some responses were conditional. Respondents made a selection but said that it may not always be the best one for families.
Well, I think they should stay home, but I know that’s not always possible. It depends on their financial situation…

This respondent feels that family income may affect decisions on work. Some respondents gave conditional responses because they saw a number of different scenarios within the question.

I mean I can see benefits to part time work when a child is under school age but I think only slightly under school age, so if it’s only slightly under school age I would say part time. Umm.. but if the child is younger than three, I’d say “stay at home”. So, again, for me, under school age is a bit too broad. It would need to be broken down into a bit more choice about, well what do you mean but under school age? If it’s a toddler, baby in a cradle or a four year old kid who is maybe only 12 months away from school.

**Complexity**

Most respondents recognized the complexity of family circumstances and decision making in relation to work and family choices.

Well, in the five and a half years at home, I’ve worked part time, and casually, and then for nine months worked a 20 hour week, which was still part time, but that you evolve…..you aren’t just one of these, I’m not one of these, I’m not one of them because in the five and half years that I’ve been at home, I’ve been all three of those.

Some also clearly recognized a role for other people and organizations in family and work choices.

My response is emotionally angry that the government doesn’t make that choice available for a lot of women, a lot of single mums, so yes, again I think that is not up to the community to decide, or the society to decide, whether or not women should choose to work outside the home or not if there’s a kid around, regardless of her circumstances it has to be up to her. There’s not enough…..the way I think, I go off onto this tangent
which says, there’s not enough support available for single mums to be able to have that choice for most women in those circumstances.

….it’s talking about the woman, but it really is that….within a family then it’s impossible for her to return to work full time unless the partner is supportive. You can’t……well, people probably do it, but there would have to be, to make it easy for the woman, the partner would have to be very supportive….

Responding to the question

Many respondents expressed negative feelings about the question, including that they found it difficult to answer.

…. first, my reaction is that the question is ridiculous, why is it framed like that? But I know it’s part of a study….  

Well this is a question that I would go (sighs), well, it’s very ambiguous in the sense that it doesn’t take into consideration a whole range of people’s circumstances. And I don’t think that question really reflects what people would answer.

In the final quote, above, the respondent makes a distinction between answering the question (from the survey), and answering the “real” question (of work and family choices).

‘Can’t choose”

One of the ways difficulties in providing a response seem to manifest in this study is that a much larger than expected proportion of respondents selected “can’t choose” as their response. It seems this is both a study and a mode effect. Respondents were told in the initial stages of
recruitment and interview that the study was an investigation of the questions and the purpose of the study was to obtain more detailed information about responses than the usual delivery could get. Respondents were encouraged to share their reasoning with the interviewer, and this, combined with the additional time which was allowed for responses because the interviews were face to face, encouraged respondents to more deeply consider their responses that they would otherwise do. That said, the small sample size in this study means responses are in no way representative nor can they be generalized, so the misshapen response matrix may be only a quirk of sample. But, for many respondents “can’t choose” does not reflect their attitude.

(R points at “can’t choose”) I’d like to change this response not to “can’t choose” but to “none of these options are suitable” because “can’t choose” kind of implies that I’m a bit of a dickhead and can’t quite process the other responses. I can process them and I’m unhappy with them.

This respondent has selected “can’t choose” and is asked if that response reflect the respondent’s attitude.

No. no, because “can’t choose” means that I’m undecided as to which of these options answers the question. That, to me is what “can’t choose” means. And yet, I know how to answer that question, if the question is rephrased.

So “can’t choose” is not an attractive response for at least some of those for whom no other response seems appropriate. This may help to disguise difficulties respondents have with answering the question by weighing against their tendency to select “can’t choose”.

Conclusion

Probert and Murphy’s concerns about the data used by Evans and Kelley are largely supported. In their qualitative work, Probert and Murphy found respondents strained to resolve what they thought was best with what they wanted for themselves and what their circumstances allowed. Respondents in this study saw the same tensions inherent in the survey question they were presented with, to varying degrees. Some rejected the idea that they should choose what was best for others, and some gave responses which were conditional and contingent. Most recognized great complexity in decisions mothers make about paid and unpaid work, and some saw a role for other adults and organizations in work arrangements.

In the informality of the qualitative interview, some respondents were able to select a response while insisting on their conditions, and other respondents found the question so misshaped their attitudes that they refused to provide a response. It is not clear how respondents deal with this in the relatively detached environment of the written questionnaire or telephone interview.

These criticisms are not to say that attitudinal surveys cannot provide important evidence on what Australians think is best, what they want or plan for themselves. The mere fact of this data being quantitative is not its flaw. Rather, quantitative data should be a tool which allows us to make generalizations about matters whose existence we have documented through qualitative research.
References


Table 1.

“Mother’s moral views on ideal activity pattern while children are under six, Australia, 1994 and 2001”

Do you think women should work outside the home full-time, part-time, or not at all…when there are children under six?

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<th>(Implied hours of employment)</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>40 hours</td>
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<tr>
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<td>33</td>
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