

Helping does not always help: how assisting children with questionnaires introduces bias

Roel Kooijmans, Peter E. Langdon & Xavier Moonen

introduction

Many children and youth struggle to complete surveys and questionnaires by themselves. They are often assisted when asked to give their opinion. From discussions with youth from the client council at a residential treatment facility for youths in The Netherlands, the notion emerged that interaction factors may impact the results of surveys, especially when sensitive topics are addressed.



Study aims and design

What?

Investigate whether response bias is introduced if children and youth are assisted when completing a questionnaire.

Quantitative

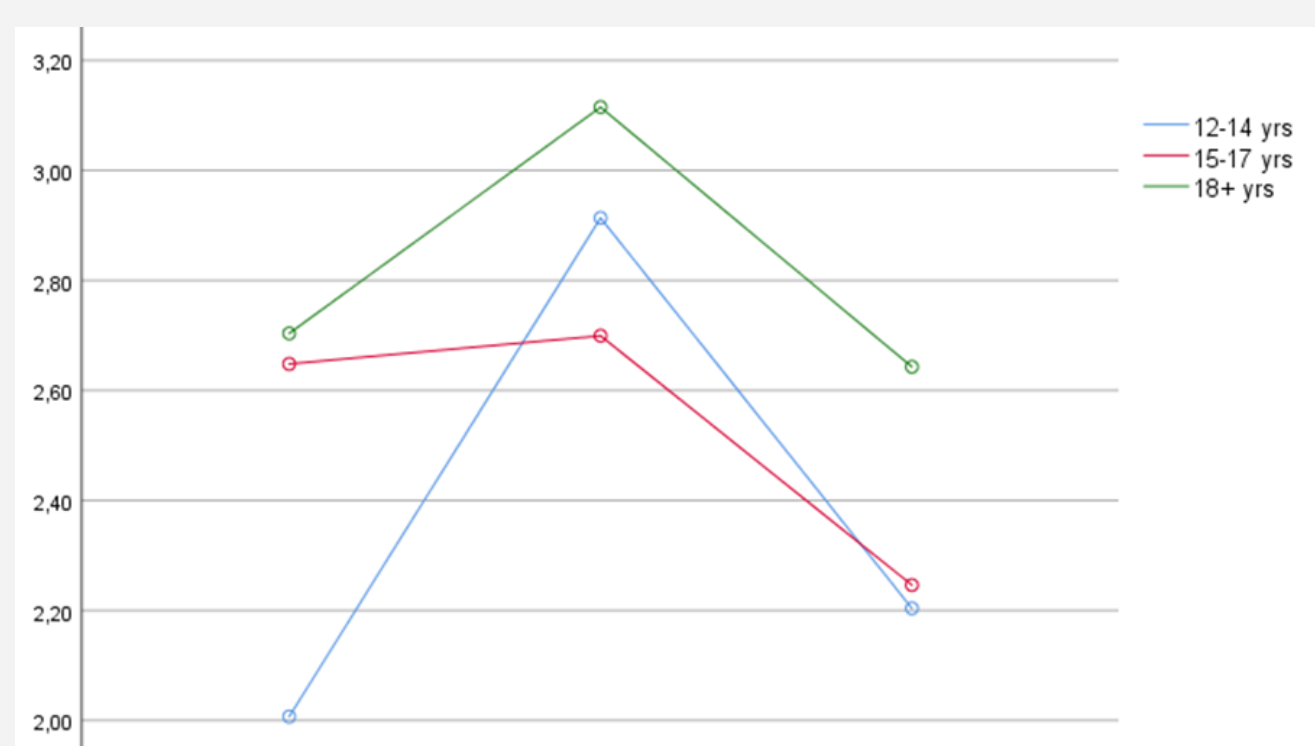
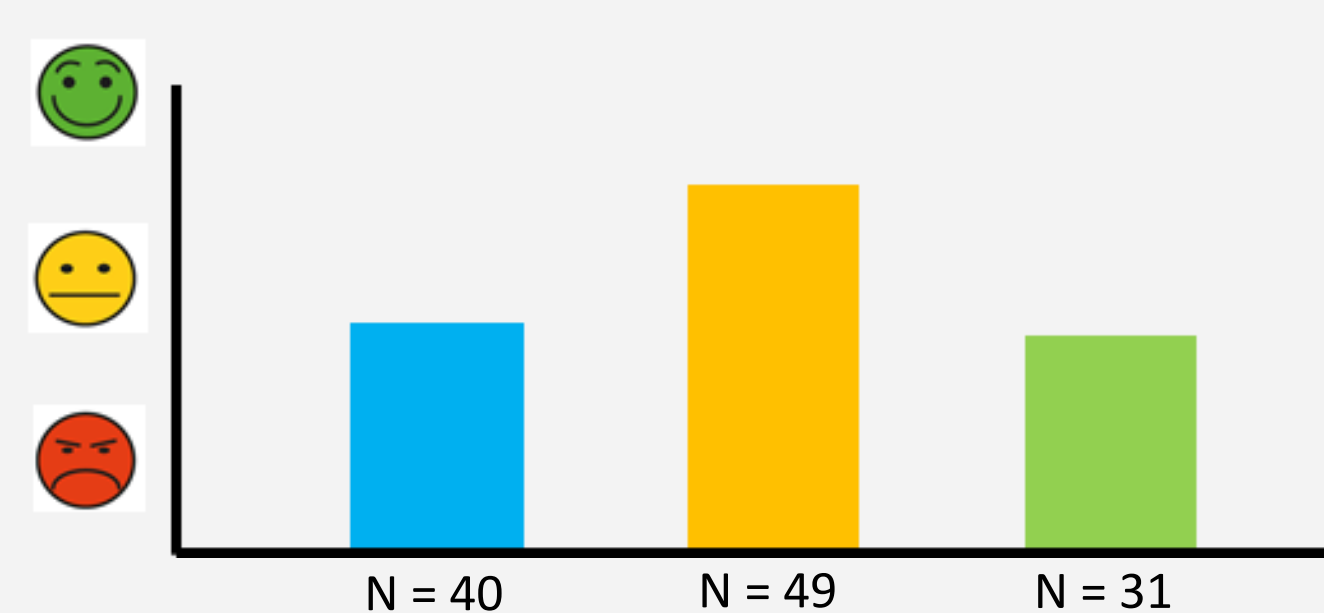
Experimental study: comparison of assisted versus non-assisted conditions. Quantitative data were analysed statistically, but limited inferences were made from the data.

Hypotheses

- Acquiescence:** all respondents tend to answer affirmatively to all (positively worded) items
- Social desirability:** respondents tend to answer more positively in the presence of authority figures
- Dependency:** respondents tend to answer more positively in the presence of a care worker



Quantitative results



Significantly higher scores were observed if children were assisted by a familiar care worker.

The effect was (marginally) greater for younger children.

explanatory sequential design

Why?

If assistance proved to influence scores: explore what the nature of this bias is and what mechanisms underly the occurrence of bias.

Qualitative

Focus group study: what happened in the quantitative study? The qualitative part of the design is used to explore possible explanations for the quantitative results.

Focus group results

looking for explanations together...

Focus groups (3 x 5 youths) and interviews (N = 5)

Youths agreed that the following mechanisms played a role:

- Functional dependency:** Many youths depend on their care workers to arrange things for them. Maintaining a positive working relation is helpful, being critical may damage the relation. *"better keep my care worker happy..."*
- Fear of retribution:** Some youths fear spiteful reactions of a care worker if they are being overly critical. They think they may be viewed as insolent or ungrateful. *"It is not always smart to be honest..."*
- Submissiveness:** Youths want to give what they think might be the 'right' answer. *"I think it's better not to offend anyone!"* *"Hmmm... I'm not sure this is what she expects me to answer..."*
- Empathy:** Some youths feel sorry for care workers if they criticise their functioning or speak negatively of the client-carer relation.

Synthesis: recommendations for professionals

- If you ask a young person to fill in a questionnaire, make clear what will be done with the results beforehand.
- Ask if the young person would like assistance. Do not assume that you will always help the young person by helping them. Completing the questions independently minimises the chance of influencing results. *Need help?*
- If you doubt a young person can do it independently, ask them to answer the first questions together to see how they manage. Well-designed measures will have practice questions.

- If a young person needs help or asks for assistance, ask whom they want to help them. Preferably, the young person chooses for him- or herself. Depending on the circumstances and subject, this may also be a peer or parent.
- When administering surveys as a part of scientific research procedures, register if the respondent had been assisted and by whom. When analysing your data, make sure that results from independently completed questionnaires are comparable to those of respondents who were helped.
- If standardisation is important for your research, the conditions under which surveys are completed should be as equivalent as possible. There are two options:
 - Simplify the questions to the extent that (nearly) every person can fill out the survey independently. Add 'pre-test' questions to assess that the young person adequately understands the questions. Evidence-based suggestions to build inclusive self-report measures can be found here.
 - If you think a substantial part of the target population needs assistance, arrange for independent, impartial, well-trained assistants.



Kooijmans, R., Langdon, P. E., & Moonen, X. (2022). Assisting children and youth with completing self-report instruments introduces bias: A mixed-method study that includes children and young people's views. *Methods in Psychology*, 7, 100102.

