

Where Leading Questions Can Lead: The Power of Conjecture in Social Interaction

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A theoretical analysis of the structure of social interaction led us to postulate two distinct processes through which leading questions may mislead people. When a questioner asks a leading question of a respondent, observers may use their knowledge of conversational rules to infer that the questioner had an evidentiary basis for the question. Hence, observers will treat the question as *conjectural evidence* for the view of the respondent implied by the question. In addition, observers who listen to respondents answer leading questions may be misled by the answers because, in an effort to cooperate with the questioner, respondents may supply *behavioral evidence* that misrepresents their actual personalities. To test these hypotheses, we conducted two experiments in which observers listened to tape-recorded interviews. Questioners in these interviews asked respondents a series of leading questions that probed for evidence of either introversion or extroversion. The first experiment showed that it did not matter whether observers had access to the conjectural evidence in the interviewer's questions, the behavioral evidence in respondent's answers, or both. In each case observers inferred that the respondent possessed the characteristics for which the questioner had probed. The second experiment showed that when the evidentiary basis of the conjectures was undermined by informing observers that the leading questions had been drawn from a fishbowl, observers ignored conjectural evidence but still used behavioral evidence. The discussion considered the processes through which conjectures may create their own cognitive and behavioral reality.

There are many ways to learn about people. One strategy is to use behavioral evidence. For example, the sight of Maxwell rapping his teacher with a hammer will cause most observers to conclude that Maxwell is rather nasty. Another general strategy is to rely on the conjectures of others or on conjectural evidence. Upon overhearing a judge ask Maxwell why he assaulted his teacher, most observers will deduce that it is best to stay clear of Maxwell. In these and

other instances, behavioral and conjectural evidence may lead to identical inferences. Nevertheless, there may be basic and fundamental differences in the processes that underlie and mediate these inferences. The primary purpose of this article is to identify and elaborate these processes.

Theoretically, at least, the inference process initiated by behavioral evidence is relatively straightforward. Having observed someone behave, people consider the behavior and the context in which it emerged in an effort to discern the degree to which the action signals an underlying trait or disposition of the individual (e.g., Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1971). In this way observers may come to regard those who behave aggressively as belligerent, those who display friendly behavior as sociable, and those who behave submissively as passive or weak.

Somewhat more complex inference processes may be needed to interpret conjectural

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evidence. When people are exposed to such information, they must not only attach meaning to the evidence itself, they must also evaluate the source of the evidence. Thus, for example, if one overhears a judge ask Maxwell why he assaulted his teacher, one might be concerned with the motives of the judge as well as those of Maxwell. After all, in asking his question, the judge conveyed a premise: Maxwell assaulted his teacher. Cautious observers might ask themselves how the judge derived this premise and what factors led the judge to conclude that Maxwell was guilty.

Or would they? Although it seems appropriate to question the premises that people offer, there is reason to believe that people may seldom do so. An emerging literature within psycholinguistics (e.g., Clark & Haviland, 1977; Grice, 1975), communication (e.g., Hopper, 1981), and sociology (e.g., Goffman, 1974; Shutz, 1967) suggests that when observers hear an individual offer a premise in conversation, they will not stop to consider its validity. Instead, they will simply assume that the individual had sound reasons for offering the premise.

The reasons underlying people's propensity to accept uncritically the conversational premises of others have been most clearly articulated by Grice (1975). According to Grice, communication is a cooperative venture in which speakers strive to adhere to a number of rules and principles. One such rule, the maxim of quality, says that people should only make statements for which they have evidence. With this maxim in mind, observers who hear an individual ask a leading question will reason that the speaker must have had an evidential basis to justify the premise inherent in the question. They will therefore accept the validity of the premise. In addition, having accepted the premise, observers may go further and make appropriate inferences about the respondent. In this manner, the premises embedded in leading questions may quickly become foregone conclusions. Observers need no trial, no evidence. In their eyes, recipients of questions such as *Do you still beat your wife?* or *Are you still burning up the tennis court?* will quickly *become* the scoundrels or heroes that the questions imply.

But if leading questions can sometimes cause observers to jump to conclusions about respondents, it is interesting to ask if such conclusions are ever undone when observers hear respondents answer such questions. Analyses of the social communication process (e.g., Clark & Haviland, 1977; Goffman, 1974; Grice, 1975; Schegloff, 1968, 1972; Shutz, 1967) suggest not. According to these formulations, people's questions tend to "frame" respondents' answers by suggesting some answers and excluding others, thus limiting the field of acceptable replies. To fulfill their role in the interaction, respondents must do their best to provide the requested information, even if the information they provide is not entirely representative. In effect, the structure of the social communication process encourages respondents to allow themselves to be led by leading questions by supplying plausible but sometimes misleading replies to biased inquiries.

Ordinarily, the rules that enjoin people to provide fitting responses to leading questions are easily followed. After all, most people have engaged in a wide variety of social behaviors. As a result, they will probably be quite able to point to at least some past behaviors that will verify the premises inherent in virtually any leading question. For example, just as most people can recall times when they behaved in a friendly and sociable manner, so too can most recollect instances in which they acted in a rather shy and standoffish manner. Accordingly, if someone were to ask a respondent leading questions that probed for evidence of a given trait or disposition, the respondent would probably be generous in providing such evidence.¹

When respondents provide such behavioral evidence, observers will most likely use

¹ We do not wish to imply that this will be equally true for all leading questions all of the time. For example, most people will be apt to refute leading questions that probe for relatively rare traits (e.g., "Can you tell me about the time that you devoured a neighbor or relative?") or highly specialized knowledge (e.g., "Can you explain the major differences between fission and fusion?"). Refutation might also occur if the respondent's self-concept happens to be at odds with the premises in the question (Swann & Hill, in press). For example, the first author once witnessed an interview in which a highly introverted individual replied to the question, "What do you do to liven things up at a party?"

it to make inferences about them—even though such evidence may in reality be shaped by the leading questions. So, for example, upon witnessing a person confess to a crime, most observers will be inclined to judge the person guilty, even if the confession was obviously extracted by a highly leading, biased, and presumptuous line of questioning. Indeed, there appears to be a pervasive tendency for people to rely on behavioral evidence, even when there is good reason to regard it as biased or unreliable (e.g., Jones, 1979; Ross, 1977; Thompson, Fong, & Rosenhan, 1981; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). This means that when observers have access to both the questions respondents are asked and the answers they provide, they will ignore the constraining influence of the questions and base their inferences solely on the answers.

Experiment 1

This experiment examined the hypothesis that observers who listened to an interviewer ask a respondent a series of leading questions would infer that the respondent possessed the characteristics implied by the leading questions. In half of the interactions, the interviewer probed for evidence of extroverted behavior only. In the other interactions, the interviewer probed for evidence of introverted behavior only.

Observers listened to these interactions under one of three conditions. Some observers had access to conjectural evidence only: the interviewer's questions (questions only). Other observers listened to behavioral evidence only: the respondent's answers (answers only). Still other observers had access to both types of evidence (questions and answers). Finally, one group of observers made inferences about respondents without hearing the interactions at all. This last condition served as a baseline control group (control).

The major dependent measure within all four conditions was observer impressions of the extroversion-introversion of respondents. In addition, we asked two questions

to index observer sensitivity to the constraining influence of the leading questions. The first question asked participants to estimate the extent to which respondents' answers were a function of their personal attributes or the questions they were asked. The second question asked them to estimate the extent to which interviewer's questions seemed biased or leading.

We anticipated that in the questions-only condition, observers would assume that interviewers asked leading questions because they had prior knowledge of the respondents and would consequently infer that respondents were the type of individuals that the questions implied they were. In the answers-only condition, we expected that respondents would allow themselves to be led by the leading questions and that hearing this, observers would infer that the respondents possessed the dispositions implied by their answers. In the questions-and-answers condition, we predicted that observers would ignore the questions respondents were asked and base their inferences solely on the answers they provided, as in the answers-only condition. Finally, we anticipated that although observers would regard the leading questions as biased in the questions-only condition, they would not regard these questions as biased in either the answers-only condition (because they could not hear them) or in the questions-and-answers condition (because when people encounter behavioral evidence, they tend to ignore any constraining influences that may have produced that evidence).

Method

Participants

One hundred fifty-five male undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this experiment for credit in their introductory psychology course. Females were excluded from the sample as a matter of convenience; when this research was initiated, there were relatively more males available. Groups of three to seven participants reported to each session of the experiment.

Procedure

Preparation of the stimulus tapes. Four pairs of female students served as stimulus persons. In each pair, one individual served as the interviewer and the other served as the respondent. A female experimenter ush-

by asserting, "I have never been to a party in my life." Such instances, however, are extremely rare (see Wegner & Wenzlaff, Note 1, for a more detailed analysis).

ered the interviewer and the respondent to adjoining rooms connected by an intercom system. This procedure prevented them from employing nonverbal signals that would not be recorded on the audiotape.

The experimenter then presented the interviewer with two separate sets of interview questions, each of which contained six questions devised by Snyder and Swann (1978). The set of extrovert questions probed for evidence of extroversion (e.g., "What would you do if you wanted to liven things up at a party?" "In what situations are you most talkative? What is it about these situations that makes you like to talk?"). The introvert questions probed for evidence of introversion (e.g., "In what situations do you wish you could be more outgoing?" "Tell me about sometime when you felt left out from some social group. How did you handle these feelings?"). Interviewers asked one of the two sets of questions, paused, then asked the other set. This allowed each respondent to serve in both the extrovert- and introvert-questions conditions. Respondents answered the interviewer's questions spontaneously, the only constraint being that they were instructed not to repeat or rephrase the question in fashioning their answers.

The experimental sessions. The experimenter informed participants (designated "observers") that they would be listening to an interview made the previous semester by two female introductory psychology students. Prior to playing the tape, she provided all observers with fictitious background information about the interviewer and respondent, including their names, hometowns, majors, and heights. She then explained that depending on the condition they were assigned to, observers would be asked to form an impression of the respondent based on the interviewer's questions only (questions-only condition), the respondent's answers only (answers-only condition), both the interviewer's questions and the respondent's answers (questions-and-answers condition), or the background information alone (control condition). In all conditions except for the control, the experimenter then played the appropriate portion of the introvert or extrovert tape.

Observers rated the respondent on 10, 7-point bipolar scales designed by Snyder & Swann (1978) to tap introversion-extroversion: talkative-quiet, unsociable-sociable, friendly-unfriendly, poised-awkward, introverted-extroverted, enthusiastic-apatetic, shy-outgoing, energetic-relaxed, cold-warm, unconfident-confident. They then indicated their perceptions of why the respondent answered as she did on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (the questions she was asked) to 7 (the kind of person she is). On a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (definitely no) to 7 (definitely yes), they then indicated their perceptions of whether or not the questions were biased.

Results and Discussion

Observers' Impressions of Respondents

To assess observers' impressions of respondents, we first computed an impression index by averaging observers' ratings of respondents on the 10 trait scales (the internal

consistency of this index was .88, as assessed by coefficient alpha). We then entered these scores into a 3(evidence type: questions, answers, questions and answers) \times 2(question type: extrovert, introvert) analysis of variance (ANOVA).² We expected that whether observers heard the questions, the answers, or both, those who listened to the extrovert tapes would rate respondents as more extroverted than those who listened to the introvert tapes. This was the case. The ANOVA yielded a reliable effect for question type, $F(1, 115) = 151.56, p < .001$, and no main or interaction effects for evidence type. The means, displayed in Table 1, show that observers in all three extrovert-tape conditions perceived respondents to be more extroverted than did controls, whereas observers in all three introvert-tape conditions perceived respondents to be more introverted than did controls (all $ps < .05$, according to a Dunnett test).

In sum, observers asserted that the recipients of leading questions were the type of individuals that the questions suggested they were. Moreover, this was equally true whether they possessed conjectural evidence (questions only), behavioral evidence (answers only), or both (questions and answers).

Observers' Perceptions of the Interview

We anticipated that observers would be sensitive to the constraining influence of the questions when the questions alone were available, but not when the answers were available. Analyses of the observers' perceptions of the interview supported this prediction. A 3 \times 2 ANOVA of observers' impressions of why respondents answered the questions as they did revealed a main effect for evidence type, $F(2, 115) = 26.218, p < .001$, and no other effects. As can be seen in Table 2, observers in the questions-only condition tended to attribute respondents' answers to the questions they were asked. In contrast, those in the answers-only, ques-

² Preliminary analyses revealed that there were no main or interactive effects of either stimulus persons or the type of questions stimulus persons answered first on any dependent measure; hence, we collapsed the data across these dimensions in all analyses.

Table 1
Experiment 1: Observers' Impressions of Respondents

Question type	Evidence type			
	Questions only	Answers only	Questions and answers	Control
Introvert				
<i>M</i>	3.77	3.49	3.66	—
<i>n</i>	21	21	20	—
Extrovert				
<i>M</i>	4.98	5.47	5.25	—
<i>n</i>	17	20	22	—
None				
<i>M</i>	—	—	—	4.40
<i>n</i>	—	—	—	34

Note. Possible range is 1.0 to 7.0. Higher numbers indicate that observers attributed more extroversion to respondents.

tions-and-answers, and control conditions tended to attribute respondents' answers to the type of persons they were.

A similar pattern emerged when we analyzed observers' estimates of the extent to which the questions were biased. The overall ANOVA showed a main effect for evidence type, $F(2, 115) = 5.847$, $p < .005$, and no other reliable effects. The means in Table 2 show that the only observers who were sensitive to the bias in the questions were those in the questions-only condition. Observers in the answers-only and questions-and-answers conditions detected no more bias in the questions than did controls.

Therefore, although observers readily recognized the constraining influence of leading

questions when such questions were presented in the abstract, they did not do so when the questions were presented in the context of the replies they evoked. Apparently, once observers had behavioral evidence in hand, they shifted their attention toward it and away from the questions that elicited this evidence. Hence, when they were asked to estimate how biased the questions were, their estimates did not differ from the controls; it was as if they had never even heard the questions. The outcome of this process, of course, was that observers failed to realize that the evidence was in large measure shaped by the questions that were asked.

The results of this experiment indicate

Table 2
Experiment 1: Observers' Perceptions of the Interview

Dependent variables (observers' perceptions)	Evidence type			
	Questions only (<i>n</i> = 38)	Answers only (<i>n</i> = 41)	Questions and answers (<i>n</i> = 42)	Control (<i>n</i> = 34)
Cause of respondents' answers ^a	2.82 _a	5.12 _c	4.52 _{bc}	4.00 _b
Amount of bias in questions ^b	5.24 _a	3.93 _b	4.38 _b	4.18 _b

Note. Within each row, numbers sharing common subscripts do not differ according to a Newman-Keuls analysis ($p < .05$).

^a Higher numbers indicate that observers attributed respondents' answers to their attributes rather than the questions.

^b Higher numbers indicate greater perceived bias in questions.

that the conjectural evidence in leading questions, the behavioral evidence in the answers they evoked, or the combination of both types of evidence all systematically channeled observers' judgments in much the same way. It is perhaps not surprising that observers were swayed by behavioral evidence. After all, hearing people describe their introverted or extroverted behaviors is reasonably sound evidence that they actually are introverted or extroverted, even if it is clear that they were encouraged to focus on these characteristics by the interviewer. More puzzling is the fact that observers were just as likely to infer that respondents were introverts or extroverts when they only heard the questions that were asked. Under these conditions, observers readily admitted that the questions were biased. Furthermore, they asserted that any replies respondents made would say more about the questions they were asked than the type of persons they were. Why, then, did these observers make the same judgments about respondents as did observers in the other conditions?

One possibility is that observers in the questions-only conditions were using the bias in the questions as a basis for judging the respondent. That is, these observers may have reasoned that for the interviewer to ask such leading questions of the respondent, she must have known something, she must have had evidence to support her conjectures. Accordingly, observers may have felt justified in using signs of bias in the questions as reason for making clear-cut inferences about respondents. In support of this contention, correlational analysis indicated that as observers in the questions-only condition became more convinced that the interviewers' questions were biased, they drew more extreme inferences about respondents, $r(38) = .41, p < .05$.

Together, these findings suggest three hypotheses. First, if observers are given no specific information concerning the origin of an interviewer's questions, they will implicitly assume that the interviewer had previous information about the respondent and that she tailored her questions specifically for the respondent. Second, if observers' implicit assumptions about the origins of the questions are undermined by explicitly telling them

that the interviewer selected her questions at random, then hearing the interviewer ask these questions should have no impact on their inferences about the respondent. Third, undermining observers' assumptions about the origins of the questions should not influence their inferences if they have access to the respondent's answers, since in this case they will still have behavioral evidence to guide their inferences. We tested each of these hypotheses in the following study.

Experiment 2

This study sought to elucidate the inference processes underlying observers' use of conjectural and behavioral evidence by manipulating observers' beliefs about the origins of the questions that an interviewer asked of a respondent. We led some observers to believe that the interviewer and respondent had no previous contact and that the questions the interviewer asked were chosen at random from a fishbowl (fishbowl-origin condition). Other observers, like those in Experiment 1, were told nothing of the previous relationship between the interviewer and respondent, nor were they told how the questions were selected (unspecified-origin condition). All observers then listened to a tape-recorded interview in which the interviewer probed for either introverted or extroverted qualities. Observers had access to either the questions only, the answers only, or both. They then rated the respondent and answered two questions concerning how the interviewer selected her questions.

We expected that when observers heard only the questions and believed that the questions had been randomly drawn from a fishbowl, they would not use the questions as a basis for making inferences about the respondent. In all other conditions—when observers heard only the questions but were told nothing of their origin, or when they heard the respondents' answers either alone or with the questions—we anticipated that they would infer that the respondent possessed the introverted or extroverted qualities that the interviewer sought to uncover. Also, we expected that in the unspecified-origin conditions, observers would assume that interviewers had previous knowledge of

the respondent that dictated their choice of questions but that this assumption would be undermined in the fishbowl-origin conditions.

Method

Participants

One hundred ninety-eight male undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this experiment for credit in their introductory psychology course.

Procedure

All aspects of the procedure were the same as those in Experiment 1, with the following modifications. In this study we manipulated the origin of the questions. In the unspecified-origin conditions, we said nothing of the origin of the questions, as in the first experiment. In the fishbowl-origin conditions, we indicated that the interviewer had never even been introduced to the respondent and had chosen her questions by randomly drawing them from a fishbowl filled with a number of question packages, each of which contained six questions that probed for evidence of a given trait.

In addition to the manipulation of the question origin, this experiment deviated from the design of Experiment 1 in three ways. First, since there were no interactions with stimulus persons in the previous study, we used the tapes of only one stimulus pair. Second, we excluded the fictitious background information to increase the generalizability of our procedure. Finally, instead of asking observers to report their perceptions of the interview, we asked them to indicate whether the interviewer and respondent knew one another prior to the interview and whether the questions were drawn at random.

Results and Discussion

Observers' Impressions of Respondents

To assess observers' impressions of respondents, we computed an impression index as in Experiment 1 and entered these scores into a 3(questions, answers, questions and answers) \times 2(introvert questions, extrovert questions) \times 2(unspecified origin, fishbowl origin) between-subjects ANOVA. We expected that the fishbowl manipulation would undermine the impact of the introvert and extrovert questions in the questions-only condition but not in the answers-only or questions-and-answers conditions. Just such a pattern of data emerged. The ANOVA yielded a reliable three-way interaction, $F(2, 186) = 3.75$, $p < .03$. Simple main effects analyses (Winer, 1971) showed that the re-

Table 3
Experiment 2: Observers' Impressions of Respondents

Question type	Evidence type		
	Questions only	Answers only	Questions and answers
Unspecified question origin			
Introvert			
<i>M</i>	3.74	3.63	3.95
<i>n</i>	18	16	17
Extrovert			
<i>M</i>	5.05	4.81	5.17
<i>n</i>	16	16	16
Fishbowl question origin			
Introvert			
<i>M</i>	4.12	3.87	3.81
<i>n</i>	16	16	16
Extrovert			
<i>M</i>	4.10	4.89	4.76
<i>n</i>	19	16	16

Note. Higher numbers indicate that observers attributed more extroversion to respondents.

sults in the unspecified-origin conditions were identical to the results of Experiment 1: In all three conditions (questions only, answers only, questions and answers), observers rated the respondent in the extrovert tape to be more extroverted than the same respondent in the introvert tape (all $ps < .01$). In contrast, when observers believed that the questions were drawn from a fishbowl, they assigned different ratings to the respondent in the extrovert and introvert tapes in the answers-only and questions-and-answers conditions ($ps < .01$), but not in the questions-only condition. The relevant means are displayed in Table 3.

These data clearly confirm our major prediction. When steps were taken to block the tendency of observers to assume automatically that the conjectures in leading questions are based on evidence, they made no inferences about the targets of such conjectures on hearing the leading questions alone. At the same time, when observers witnessed the answers that such leading questions evoked from respondents, they made full use of this information in forming impressions

of respondents, even if they knew that the questions that elicited the respondents' answers were randomly drawn from a fishbowl.

Observers' Perceptions of the Origins of the Questions

We expected that observers in the unspecified-origin conditions would implicitly assume that the interviewer knew the respondent prior to the interview and that she purposefully selected the questions but that observers in the fishbowl-origin conditions would not make these assumptions. The results supported these predictions. Of the 99 observers in the fishbowl and unspecified conditions, 95 of those in the fishbowl conditions versus only 59 in the unspecified conditions asserted that the interviewer knew nothing about the respondent ($z = 9.68, p < .001$). Also, 93 observers in the fishbowl conditions as compared to 29 in the unspecified conditions claimed that the interview questions were drawn at random ($z = 19.02, p < .001$).³

In addition to providing independent evidence for the effectiveness of the fishbowl manipulations, these data speak to the implicit assumptions that people make when they hear interviewers (and perhaps people in general) ask leading questions of others. Specifically, it appears that most people infer that individuals do not simply ask such questions "out of the blue"; instead, they assume that leading questions are grounded in concrete evidence. Such assumptions, of course, are probably accurate most of the time and are hence quite reasonable. In fact, according to some theorists (e.g., Clark & Haviland, 1977; Grice, 1975; Hopper, 1981), such assumptions are critical to the smooth and effective operation of the social communication process. It is therefore not surprising that our participants made these assumptions; indeed, it would be remarkable if they did not. Still, as useful as these assumptions may often be, the blessings they bestow may be rather mixed. In particular, our findings suggest that at times these assumptions may lead social observers to make inferences that are decidedly inaccurate.

General Discussion

Our research and related research suggest that there are at least three distinct ways in which leading questions may mislead people. Specifically, leading questions may serve as conjectural evidence, they may elicit behavioral evidence, and they may channel the self-images of respondents.

Leading Questions May Serve as Conjectural Evidence

Experiment 1 suggested that when observers hear someone ask leading questions, they infer that the recipient was the kind of person who "deserved" the question. Thus, merely hearing someone offer a conjecture about respondents by asking them leading questions will prompt observers to form corresponding impressions of such respondents.

Although the research reported here focused exclusively on the effects of leading questions, it is clear that other types of conjectural evidence may function in much the same way. For example, in their research on innuendo in the media, Wegner, Wenzlaff, Kerker, and Beattie (1981) studied the impact of variations in how conjectural evidence is presented. They discovered that whether conjectures are embedded in incriminating questions (e.g., Did Maxwell strike his teacher?) or in denials (e.g., Maxwell did not strike his teacher), observers tend to infer that the target of the conjecture is guilty. This suggests that the specific manner in which conjectures are set forth may not matter; regardless of how they are stated, observers treat them as evidence.

The processes that underlie and mediate the effects of conjectural evidence were illuminated in Experiment 2. In this study we found that if observers learned that the questioner randomly drew her questions from a fishbowl, hearing only the leading questions had no impact on observers' evaluations of respondents. Apparently, the impact of conjectural evidence resides in the tendency of

³ An ANOVA of these data revealed no main or interactive effects of any other variable ($F_s < 1.60, ns$).

observers to assume that the person offering the conjecture had an evidentiary basis for doing so. When this implicit assumption is undermined by informing them that the conjecture came out of thin air, observers ignore the conjecture.

There is a naturally occurring phenomenon that parallels the conditions we established with our fishbowl manipulation. This phenomenon occurs whenever people encounter individuals whose judgments are considered unreliable. For example, mental patients often complain that their statements are ignored or belittled, presumably because their interaction partners assume that what they have to say is untenable (e.g., Braginsky, Braginsky, & Ring, 1969). Similarly, children are frequently frustrated by the reluctance of members of the adult community to take their assertions seriously. The experiences of mental patients and children show that although people may characteristically accept the conjectures of other individuals, they do so only when they can safely assume that these individuals are rational and knowledgeable.

*Leading Questions May Elicit
Behavioral Evidence*

Our research suggests that leading questions may also mislead people by constraining the answers of respondents. We found that individuals who were asked leading questions readily supplied behavioral evidence that confirmed the premises inherent in the questions. This tendency for respondents to allow themselves to be led by leading questions appears to be a pervasive one. To wit, we reanalyzed 40 interviews from a study by Snyder and Swann (1978, Investigation 2). In this study, questioners asked a series of 8 to 12 leading questions. Approximately half of the time, the questions probed for evidence of a trait that the respondent actually possessed; half of the time, the questions probed for evidence of a trait that the respondent did not possess. Our analyses of these interviews indicated that whether respondents possessed the sought after attributes made little difference; overall, respondents accepted the premises in-

herent in the questions 97% of the time.⁴ Therefore, these data highlight one set of circumstances within which people will behaviorally confirm the expectations of others, even when these expectations are false.

The apparent generality of this tendency to accept the premises of others suggests that it may be rule bound. That is, in formulating replies to leading questions, respondents may adhere to implicit rules of social discourse that encourage them to provide information that is requested. Since leading questions encourage recipients to come forth with highly nonrepresentative or biased answers, this is precisely what they provide (cf. Clark & Haviland, 1977; Grice, 1975; Schegloff, 1968, 1972).

Once respondents offer such nonrepresentative answers, our data indicate that observers will take them to heart. This is not particularly surprising when observers only have the answers a respondent made, for there is little in the way of mitigating evidence to suggest that the answers were fashioned in response to biased questions. But our findings indicate that observers reach the same conclusions when they are exposed to the questions along with the answers, even when those questions are known to have been randomly drawn from a fishbowl. It is as though these observers ignored the fact that the questions were unjustified and shifted their attention to the answers. Apparently, once respondents' answers "let the cat out of the bag," observers saw no reason to concern themselves with how the bag was opened.

This tendency of behavioral evidence to dominate observers' impressions may represent one more instance of "behavior engulfing the field" (cf. Heider, 1958; Ichheiser, 1949; Jones, 1979; Ross, 1977). Thus, observers may have simply failed to correct for the powerful channeling influence that situational forces such as questions can have on behavior and focused instead on the behavioral evidence that the questions called

⁴ Two undergraduates coded these interviews. Their assessments of whether respondents accepted the premises inherent in the questions were in agreement 100% of the time.

forth. Once observers began to focus on the respondents' introverted or extroverted behaviors, these behaviors probably became more cognitively available, that is, easier to retrieve and bring to mind. Such enhanced cognitive availability may then have elevated observers' estimates of the frequency of these behaviors (e.g., Taylor, 1980; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) and led them to judge the respondent as the kind of person who *often* behaved in an introverted or extroverted manner. From this perspective, after having listened to a respondent answer a series of questions that probed for evidence of extroversion, observers reasoned, "Well, I can remember her describing lots of outgoing and social behaviors. Since there were so many of them, it must be that she engages in extroverted behavior most of the time. She must be an extrovert."

Leading Questions May Channel Self-Images of Respondents

If it is surprising that observers are so readily misled by leading questions, it is perhaps even more surprising that respondents themselves may also fall prey. Swann and Hill (Note 2,) had participants answer either 10 questions that probed for evidence of extroversion or 10 questions that probed for evidence of introversion. Then participants completed a series of questionnaires in which items relevant to their extroversion were embedded. Analyses of these ratings indicated that those who answered the introverted questions described themselves as relatively introverted, whereas those who answered the extroverted questions described themselves as relatively extroverted.

Although additional data indicated that this effect disappeared within several days, it is clear that answering leading questions can at least temporarily change the way people view themselves (cf. Fazio, Effrein, & Falender, 1981). Moreover, other research and theorizing suggest that if people are repeatedly confronted with such questions, they may permanently change their self-conceptions (see Swann, in press, for a consideration of when such shifts in self-ratings will be lasting or transitory).

Conclusion

Clearly, leading questions may initiate a number of cognitive and interpersonal processes that may dramatically influence the nature of social reality. Experiment 1 showed that observers may treat such questions as conjectural evidence in forming impressions of others. The second experiment indicated that even when the value of leading questions as conjectural evidence is compromised, observers will still be swayed by the supportive behavioral evidence that these questions evoke. Through the operation of these processes, the conjectures inherent in leading questions may come to gain more legitimacy than they rightfully deserve.

Our findings suggest that an important set of mechanisms through which social conjectures acquire such legitimacy are taken-for-granted rules of social interaction that are ordinarily quite functional. To be sure, without these implicit rules, social discourse would be frightfully cumbersome and inefficient. Still, the possibility that the power of social conjectures is realized through the operation of taken-for-granted rules of social interaction is troublesome. It suggests, for example, that the conditions that tend to perpetuate erroneous conjectures may not be limited to the pages of newspapers (e.g., Wegner et al., 1981), the courtroom (e.g., Loftus, 1975), or psychological experiments (e.g., Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975) but may instead be present in nearly all human social interactions. Furthermore, because these rules seem to be implicit in social interaction, people may fail to recognize whether these rules are leading them to understand or misunderstand the people around them.

Reference Notes

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