

Hypothetically tweaking: Research shows questions can influence behavior, promote bias

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Hypothetically speaking, if someone told you that a hypothetical question could influence your judgments or behaviour, would you believe them?

University of Alberta Business researcher Sarah Moore's research has shown that hypothetical questions are not as innocuous as one would believe. In a study recently published in the journal *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes*, Moore and her colleagues found that hypothetical questions can be used to influence people's [behaviours](#) and opinions. The problem exists, she says, because people are unaware of the potential for these questions to bias behaviours.

"In general, we have theories about when people are trying to influence us. For example, we have some defenses against advertising," Moore said. "But hypothetical questions are [wolves](#) in sheep's clothing because we don't think of them as being influence tactics."

Leading the respondent

Hypothetical questions, which are frequently used in jury selection and political polling, can be used to create a bias or further entrench an existing belief, says Moore, and that the purpose of using these questions in a pre-trial examination of potential jurors is to detect bias. However, one study revealed that pre-trial questions can actually create bias. Two

groups participating in a jury study were asked the following question: "Hypothetically speaking, if the individual in this court case was a member of a gang, would that influence your ability to be impartial?"

One group, the debiased group, was told that the question was developed by lawyers and should not influence their [judgments](#); this debiased group was less likely to convict than the group that was not cautioned about letting the questions bias them. Moore says that by not reminding them of the hypothetical nature of the question, the biased group seemed to view the content as fact rather than a supposition.

"This pre-trial questioning in the jury system, particularly in the United States, is supposed to fix bias, but can actually introduce it instead," she said. "It goes back to being aware that the question can influence you."

Politics, push polls and poisoned beliefs

Moore says a popular form of questioning used by political parties, known as push polling, often uses a negative message to which a person will respond. She says that hypothetical questions give us new information that may or may not match our stereotypes and attitudes. The problem with this type of questioning, she says, lies with the fact that the word "if" is clouded by the negative tone being put forth, one that becomes a truth rather than imaginary scenario.

"For instance, if I introduce someone to new, hypothetical information about a certain politician being crooked, even though the information isn't true, the question will influence them over time because it matches their existing, negative beliefs about politicians," said Moore. "They'll become more negative about that politician and less likely to vote for him, and their attitude about politicians in general will become more negative."

Correction, please!

The key to preventing bias in hypothetical questions, Moore says, is to recognize the potential influence of the question. Respondents need to recognize that the information being introduced and presented to them is hypothetical and not factual in nature. She says that the more people think about the hypothetical question, without taking into account that the information provided is suppositional, the stronger the effects of bias appear to be. Recognizing that these types of questions can be used to influence one's response, however, is the first line of defense in preventing hypothetical questions from influencing one's thoughts or feelings.

"When people are made aware that the situation is hypothetical or that people are trying to influence or bias them by asking them these questions, then they are able to correct for that [bias](#)," said Moore. "They can then think about how they actually feel about the question and not be overly influenced by it.

"Hopefully, as people become more aware of this issue, hypothetical questions won't work as well to sway us."

Provided by University of Alberta

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