The Communication Latency of Antisemitic Attitudes: An Experimental Study

Heiko Beyer* and Ivar Krumpal**

1. INTRODUCTION

There might not be a discourse of more significance for the political culture of Western countries than the one grappling with the crimes of National Socialism against the Jews. The project of “re-education” not only had to fight the strong tradition of antisemitic and authoritarian resentments in Germany, but necessarily became an act of self-definition of liberal societies. Antisemitism research has elaborated its views on modern antisemitism since 1945 and has developed theoretical enhancements of classical approaches. Recent forms of antisemitism like “secondary antisemitism” (Schönbach 1961; Adorno 1997), “anti-Zionism” or “new antisemitism” (Rosenbaum 2004; Rabinovici et al. 2004) and “structural antisemitism” (Haury 2002) can be understood as reactions to the heightened public awareness and ostracism of antisemitic prejudices. The persecution and social sanctioning of antisemitic attitudes and opinions has influenced theoretical concepts and explanations within antisemitism research to some extent. However, it has had only a weak effect on methodological considerations such as how to obtain valid measures of antisemitic attitudes.

Sensitive questions in surveys are often perceived as too intrusive or even threatening, since they potentially require the interviewees to disclose behaviors or attitudes that violate social norms: “A question is sensitive when it asks for a socially undesirable answer, when it asks, in effect, that the respondent admits he or she has violated a social norm” (Tourangeau & Yan 2007: 860). Based on survey research, it is known that direct measurement of behaviors and attitudes that violate social norms yields socially desirable responses (Stocké 2004; Schnell et al. 2005; Diekmann 2008; Krumpal 2009, 2010). Interviewees tend to misreport on sensitive issues such as criminal behavior or unsocial attitudes (Van Koolwijk 1969; Lee 1993).

* Research Associate, Department of Agricultural and Rural Development, Chair of Sociology of Rural Areas, Georg-August University, Goettingen.
** Senior researcher, University of Leipzig, Department of Sociology.

1 This paper focuses on attitudes and their communication. An attitude is, “… a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly and Chaiken 1993: 1).
2 There are two possible directions of social desirability bias: systematic “underreporting” of socially undesirable characteristics and systematic “overreporting” of socially desirable ones.
The question must therefore be raised how antisemitism, being a “sensitive topic,” can be measured at all if we assume that (at least) a subset of antisemitic interviewees are aware of the public norm of anti-antisemitism, interpret surveys as public situations, and therefore underreport their antisemitic attitudes. Previous research concludes that in the context of population surveys, antisemitic attitudes are reported truthfully on the whole (Bergmann & Erb 1991a, 1991b). This conclusion is based upon empirical findings indicating that interviewees who perceive the topic “Jews” as “sensitive” nevertheless show high levels of agreement with items reflecting antisemitic attitudes (Bergmann & Erb 1991b: 282).

We argue that questions about the perceived sensitivity of the topic “Jews” can be considered as sensitive as the ones asking about actual opinions toward Jews. It is possible that underreporting already occurs when questions about the perceived sensitivity are being asked, i.e. a subset of antisemites might give socially desirable answers to the questions about their actual opinion toward Jews as well as to the questions about the perceived sensitivity of the topic “Jews.” The possible conclusion of the researcher about the existence of antisemitic attitudes drawn from a defensive stance against the topic “Jews” might not be that difficult for the common perception as presupposed by Bergmann and Erb.

Previous methodological and social-psychological studies show that the survey design and the question context may have an impact on socially desirable response behavior (Schwarz & Bayer 1989; Strack 1992; Tourangeau & Yan 2007). Following these findings, we use an experimental design to demonstrate the effect of question context on socially desirable response behavior in a survey on antisemitism. We experimentally manipulate the temporary cognitive accessibility of antisemitic primary group norms by randomly assigning interviewees to complete an antisemitism scale either before or after assessing the attitudes of their friends (peer group networks of friends are assumed to be the respective primary group in our case). We demonstrate a significant interaction effect between question order and primary group norms on the propensity to self-report antisemitic attitudes. Our results indicate that the interviewees are more likely to reveal antisemitic attitudes when their friends share an antisemitic norm and when this norm is cognitively activated before self-assessment. Section 2 will outline the theoretical connection between antisemitism theory and survey psychology, and section 3 will present the results of our empirical study in more detail. We will draw some final conclusions in section 4.

2. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Concept and theory of antisemitism

Although we can distinguish several theoretical approaches that attempt to explain modern antisemitism before 1945, most of them insisting on its peculiarity both in comparison to the older anti-Judaism and other forms of racism (see Fein 1987; Bergmann 1988; Salzborn 2010), the development of a comprehensive theory dealing with

---

3 Such variation of question order is assumed to trigger “context effects” (also known as “halo-effects,” see Nisbett & Wilson 1977) of previous questions on the answer process of subsequent questions by cognitively activating information in the previous questions that is relevant for answering the subsequent questions.