An exercise in attitude measurement
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Specification notes

AIMS OF EXERCISE: to introduce students to attitudes and their measurement by constructing a Thurstone attitude scale and to give them an understanding of practical and theoretical issues involved.

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE ASSUMED: little background theoretical knowledge is assumed but a basic knowledge of statistics would be useful (e.g. measurement scales, item statistics, coefficients of reliability and validity).

DURATION: two laboratory sessions of around 2½ hours each, plus a prior introductory lecture.

LOCATION: the exercise can be conducted in a normal classroom or teaching laboratory.

RESOURCES: blackboard, paper, writing materials, rulers, a set of percentage tables or a pocket calculator, set of ogive graphs and envelopes are required. There is also a handout which will require duplication prior to the lecture, and for this, and for other preparation, some secretarial assistance would be extremely useful.

Introduction

Why do scaling?
It may be useful at the outset to distinguish between factual and attitudinal topics or questions in survey research. Such a distinction cannot be maintained precisely because the two areas overlap, and because in most cases even 'factual' questions contain many attitudinal and subjective components which will influence the answers, but - loosely speaking - a factual question is one for which there is or could be a 'true' or 'correct' answer, such as 'When did you last go to the dentist?' This is a much simpler problem than trying to find out someone's attitudes to civil liberties, to immigrants or to a political party; the exploration of these latter topics may require more and different questions, using a variety of methods or approaches.

Put in measurement terms, we generally find that it is possible to obtain reliable answers from single questions where the topics are 'factual', but not so when the topics are affective or attitudinal. A single attitude question such as 'How do you feel about people who drink and drive?' or 'What are your views about the teaching of Latin in schools?' can be asked, and can be quantified after a fashion by means of coding frames, but often such questions do not produce measurements which are sufficiently reliable or which do justice to the...
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problem. This is because the issues are complex and often sensitive and emotional, and because the answers are likely to be influenced by various underlying components or dimensions such as the respondent's feelings about alcohol, about Latin, about schools, and so on. We find, therefore, that 'factual' topics are generally dealt with by means of single questions, whereas in the case of attitudinal topics this will not do.

This dilemma has, from the early 1920s onwards, produced a number of different solutions in the form of attitude scaling methods. (It has also led to the development or adaptation of a number of projective techniques for attitude measurement, and to still other methods such as the Semantic Differential.) It is the purpose of the present exercise to introduce the student both to some aspects of attitude theory and to some methods of attitude measurement by attempting to produce an attitude scale.

So let us first ask ourselves what an attitude is and how it works or what it does, and then go on to see what can be done to measure it reliably and - we hope - validly by means of a group of items that together form a scale.

What is an attitude?

There have been many attempts to define attitudes. One way is to think of them as 'states of readiness', as predispositions to notice, to perceive, to select, to feel, to remember and to react to a particular issue or topic (in reality, or in abstract verbal form) in a particular way whenever it arises. Thus attitudes affect most of our cognitive processes as well as our emotional ones; they dominate important aspects of our social life such as religion, marriage, politics, work and leisure, and they tend to be long-lasting and difficult to change.

An attitude is a construct, an abstraction which cannot be directly apprehended. It is an inner component of mental life which expresses itself, directly or indirectly, through such more obvious processes as stereotypes and beliefs, verbal statements or reactions, ideas and opinions, selective recall, anger or satisfaction or some other emotion; and in various other aspects of behaviour. However, the links between underlying attitudes and, say, the expression of hostility towards an ethnic minority, are subtle and complex so we must never assume that attitudes can directly predict behaviour (nor, for that matter, can we reliably infer attitudes from observations of behaviour).

It may help us to conceptualize attitudes in terms of 'levels'. If attitudes may be said to 'underlie' more 'superficial' expressions, such as beliefs and opinions, then underlying these attitudes in their turn are still deeper and more abiding constructs such as 'values', 'philosophies-of-life' and, ultimately, some aspects of 'personality'. The deeper we go, the broader, more pervasive and influential will be the constructs we encounter, and the more long lasting and change-resistant they become. Thus a male chauvinist may, at a superficial level, seem to treat women as equals and may admire a 'clever' woman for her achievements, but deeper down his orientation will remain sexist, and this may be linked to a somewhat authoritarian and inflexible value system, and to a certain rigidity of personality throughout life.

This example, tracing some of the linkages of male chauvinism, also serves to illustrate another important aspect of attitudes, namely that they are not isolated 'boxes' but are linked and intertwined in many ways, upwards and downwards as well as across to other attitude domains. Attitudes form patterns, and in each of us such patterns create our own unique outlook on life. Yet in the formation of such patterns there are also common elements so that, in a given society or sub-culture, we frequently find certain patterns that repeat themselves in many people. For example, it would not surprise us if our male chauvinist also expressed himself in favour of strong political leadership, was against abortion on demand, against random breath testing of drivers for blood alcohol level, against legalized pot, in favour of wild-life hunting, and disinclined to believe that 'small is beautiful'. We come to recognize such patterns intuitively; we sometimes give them labels (such as 'left-wing' or 'bourgeois' or 'progressive'), and we are also