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Reconstructing Social Change through Retrospective Questions: Methodological Problems and Prospects

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Retrospective questions are usually employed in social and psychological research in order to trace individual change over time or to explain the present by past events or behavior. Within this tradition, several studies have, for instance, asked questions about patterns of upbringing and child socialization. The descriptions have then, in turn, been linked with present outlooks and personality variables (see, e.g., Filipp, 1981). The usefulness of this strategy—if considered as a measurement instrument for objective conditions—rests on the individual validity and reliability of the questions.

Instead of being used on the individual level, retrospective questions can, however, also be employed on the aggregate level. If a representative sample of individuals is asked about past events and these questions have a distinct time reference, the responses can be grouped according to time period. Under these circumstances, it is possible to describe social and cultural change across time —even including those periods for which no survey data have been collected on the respective topic. Survey research might not even have existed at that time.

When used for macro-level description, aggregate-level validity and reliability rather than individual-level validity and reliability count. People might err in their time locations, but as long as these errors cancel each other out on the aggregate level, it does not matter. In order to assess the usefulness of retrospective questions on the aggregate level, it might be sufficient to have aggregate-level data as long as these can be grouped according to cohort membership for different time periods. Such an analysis is made possible when questions from earlier surveys are replicated in later time periods. These have been my aims in analyzing childhood upbringing in West Germany within this century.

Methodology

The baseline study for my analysis was Almond and Verba's 1959 study, "Civic Culture," which included not only questions on political matters but also a few

questions on upbringing in family and school. The study involved nationwide representative surveys from various countries, including West Germany (Almond & Verba, 1963). The original data are available for secondary analysis through the Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung, University of Cologne (Study No. 28). Thirty years later—in 1989—I replicated the questions on family influence in order to test the usefulness of retrospective questions for measuring change. Again, a nationwide survey was taken as the empirical basis, providing comparable conditions of data collection. This time the survey was done by the GFM-Getas institute with a sample of 1,891 respondents. As in the earlier survey, a random sample was used.

The original question in the 1959 survey was the following:

> When you grew up, let us say, when you were about 16 years of age, what kind of influence did you have in family decisions that involved you? Did you have much, little, or no influence?

The second subsequent question ran as follows:

> How was it at this time, when a decision was made that you did not like? Did you have the feeling that you could protest without inhibitions, did you have some inhibitions, or was it better not to protest?

In the replication, the same wordings were used. However, the age reference was slightly altered by the survey institute,[1] by using the reference "at this time" instead of "when you were about 16 years of age" and by establishing the age reference by means of prior questions about the employment of one's mother when the respondent was between about "14 and 16 years" of age. Using a lower age reference is not without problems. One cannot rule out that under these circumstances respondents shift the reference period to earlier years and thus provide a rather conservative estimate of their influence when 16 years old.

One could argue, however, that memory is too vague anyhow to describe exactly what went on when between 14 and 16 years old or when 16 years old. All that one can get through memory might be relatively rough descriptions of past events and behavior. Moreover, once we are interested in relative trends over time rather than agreement on an absolute level, the differential wordings lose importance.

Assimilation or Contrast Effects?

When grouping the retrospective questions on family decision making, cross-sectional survey data from various years have uniformly shown that influence in

[1]The replication was done in cooperation with a commercial survey research institute when consulting on other questions. As some kind of compensation, the institute incorporated my questions free of charge into one of its ongoing surveys. Unfortunately, the questions were slightly altered without notifying me, so that the present analysis can only be used to assess trends over time and a less absolute level of agreement. I plan to replicate the exact original wording in future studies.

the family has increased for children and youth over time. Families around the turn of the century are described as being rather authoritarian, leaving little influence to the child and youth, whereas in the second half of this century, the pattern has partially diminished (see, e.g., Reuband, 1988, 1992). What one does not know as long as one relies on cross-sectional surveys is whether the remembered part is reflective of the socialization patterns of the respective time, a product of selective memory, or both.

Memory is selective, as various studies have shown (see, e.g., Moss & Goldstein, 1979; Reuband, 1980; M. Ross, 1989). Past experiences are often seen in the light of present experiences and attitudes. Taking the present prevalent climate of behavior into consideration, people might see less change than there has been in reality, providing some form of assimilation effect. Under these circumstances, the authoritarian pattern in earlier times should be underestimated. However, it is equally plausible for people to accentuate change by basing the recall on implicit theories according to which social change has occurred (see Ross, 1989). This tendency would provide some kind of contrast effect.

The scanty data that exist for Germany on the retrospective recall of socialization patterns are mixed. Based on a comparison of a single cohort across a 30-year time period (1954–1984), a study by Zinnecker (1985) concluded that people tend to shift their perspective of influence in retrospect: They tend to view their past life as being much more regulated and rigid than they perceived it 30 years earlier. They increasingly think of themselves as having been brought up "harshly." This finding would lend support to a contrast-effect interpretation.

However, the question that was used in that study simply referred to whether the parents dealt with the respondent "harshly" or not. Other indicators, with more precise references, might be less influenced by retrospective distortion. Moreover, these are data documenting that for the periods for which trend data are available—the 50s, 60s, and 70s—change has, in fact, occurred in the direction specified by recall. Thus, in 1955, 45% of the 15–24 years olds said that they were dealt with harshly by their parents; in the replication in 1984, only 35% in the same age bracket said so (Zinnecker, 1985). In another survey in 1962, 45% of the respondents aged 16–18 years replied that way, and in 1983, 19% did so (Allerback & Hoag, 1985). In the same series, a question similar to the one used here was also asked on how much influence respondents had in family decisions. In that study as well, a trend toward greater participation emerged in the time period of observation (see Allerback & Hoag, 1985); and what is especially noteworthy, the trend was roughly parallel to the retrospective series (Reuband, 1992). Although recall might somehow be impaired, these data for the postwar period suggest that the basic trends might still be reproduced.

Findings

In the following, I use both the 1959 Almond and Verba data through secondary analysis and my new data for the period from 1900 onward. When the marginals

for both questions are compared across the 30-year time span, remarkable similarities evolve. As can be seen in Tables 19.1 and 19.2, there are only slight variations in the depiction of one's past. If the family has become less authoritarian, as cross-sectional data tend to point out when grouped according to cohort membership, far greater striking differences should have been observed in the data across time.

In a next step, summarized in Figures 19.1 and 19.2, the responses on "no family influences" and "being inhibited in protesting" are grouped according to cohort membership. Once we know the age of the respondent, we can locate him or her in this continuum, given the knowledge about the years in which he or she was 16 years old. The figure seems to indicate a change in memory *within* each of the cohorts. Among the 18–25 year olds in 1959, 16% declared that they had no influence, but 30 years later, the rate within this cohort had increased to 45%. Parallel drops in ascribed family power can be observed in the other cohorts over time. If the question of inhibitions in protesting against family decisions is taken for comparison, a similar pattern of diminishing influence is evident. People apparently see themselves as being less powerful than they really were. They seem to enhance the contrast to present-day situations.

Why and how the contrast effect become effective in this case is not clear. Leaving apart the slightly different question wordings, there are basically two

TABLE 19.1. Influence in Family Decisions at Young Age Over Time (%)

Influence	1959	1989
Much	15	17
Little	45	47
No	40	35
Total	100	100
N	(867)	(1,893)

Note: "Don't know," other responses, and "no answers" excluded. "Don't know/do not remember" in 1959 and in 1989 = 6% of the total sample.

TABLE 19.2. Inhibitions in Protesting against Family Decisions at Young Age Over Time (%)

Protest	1959	1989
Without any problem	48	45
With some inhibitions	22	28
Better not do	31	27
Total	100	100
N	(835)	(1,891)

Note: "Don't know" and "no answers" excluded; in 1959 = 8%, in 1989 = 6% of the total sample.

FIGURE 19.1. Having No Influence in Family Decisions Over Time

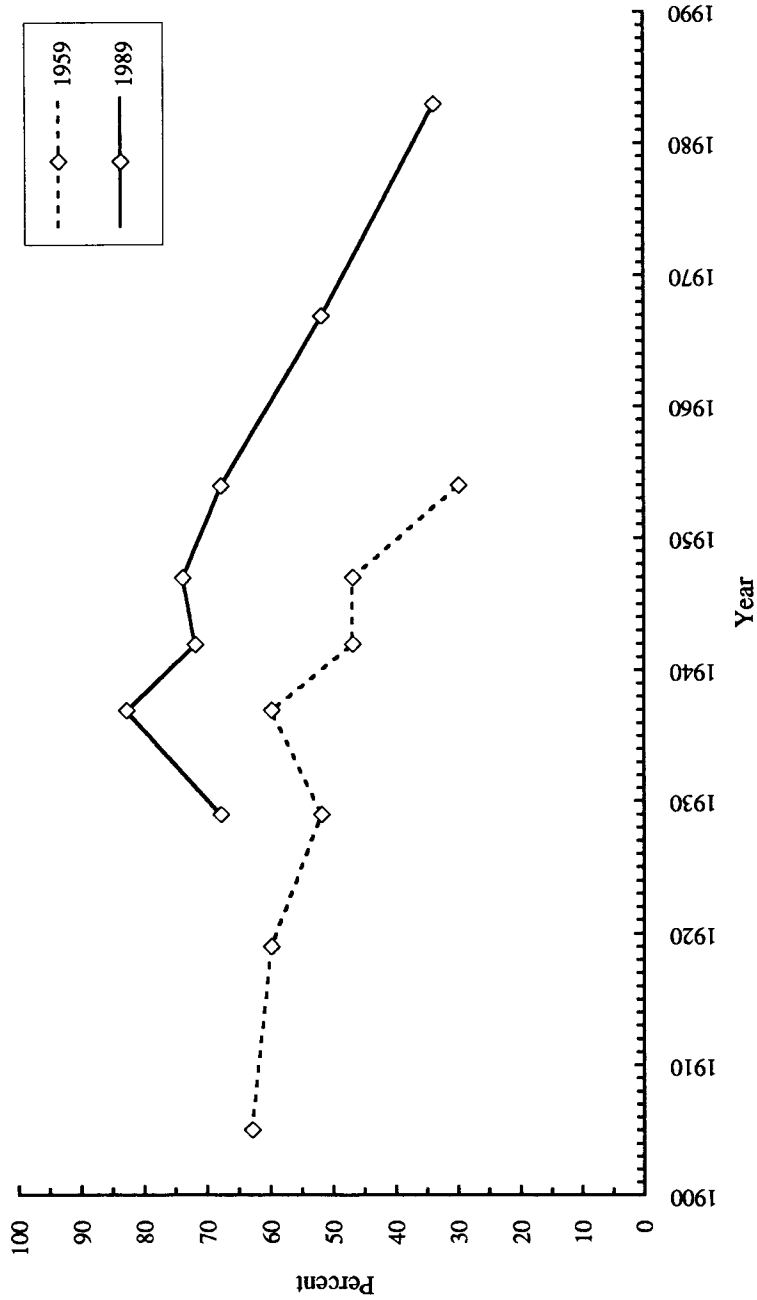

FIGURE 19.2. Feeling Inhibited To Protest against Family Decisions Over Time

possibilities that seem suggestive. One is that people might ascribe a strong change to the period under observation and might structure their recall of their past according to it. They might see much change because they think that much change should have happened. They impute their theories about change on the reconstruction of their personal biography.

The other possibility emanates from the standards of perception per se, and in the standards of linguistically labeling behavior. Categories such as "much," "little," or "no" influence, as used in the question wording, are naturally vague. They could easily change when different normative standards become prevalent in society: Influences that used to be "much" influence compared with the usual experiences of the time might have become relatively speaking "little" influence later. If this is true, shifting normative conceptions will promote shifting definitions of one's biography. Under these circumstances, the perception of the past will undergo change not when time passes per se but only when normative conceptions of family influence change in the population.

Given the ambiguity of the question-wording differences between the 1959 and 1989 surveys, the parallelity of the trend as assessed by the retrospective questions might be more intriguing, however, than the absolute level of agreement. If both indicators tap the same dimensions, both should undergo the same kind of change. If this comparison is done, the retrospective trends based on the two surveys come out as rather parallel. This even applies to short-term fluctuations such as in the late 1930s, when authoritarian family patterns underwent a slight revival. The data, whatever their absolute level, document at least *trends* correctly.[2] A distinct tendency for the older or the younger ones to shift their recollection more than other cohorts cannot be observed—except, perhaps, for the very young group, who reveal slightly more marked change in perception.

Summary

My research has shown that retrospective questions might be useful for delineating *aggregate* change with regard to general trends. Absolute levels, however, might differ; under which conditions this is the case deserves further study. There is reason to believe that people use present standards for viewing the past. I do not know whether this is due to selective perception per se or to normative standards that give rise to the use of specific linguistic categories. If the latter are the main reason, the problem of distortion should become less when standardized, concretely specified situations are made the basis of comparison. Further research into the process of constructing the past and remembering concrete details of events is warranted.

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[2]One problem, however, remains unresolved that deserves future research: What cannot be controlled for is the fact that in *both* surveys members of different cohorts have a differential time lag regarding the period that they describe. This differential is preserved in the replication, since each cohort undergoes the same shift in time.