

Research Dialogue

## Introduction to research dialogue

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Persuading people to change their behavior is a difficult task and its intricacies gave rise to a large literature on social influence and persuasion processes. Moreover, even if persuaded that some behavior change would be beneficial, people often fail to act on their good intentions (for a review see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). In stark contrast, a different body of research indicates behavior change can often be elicited by asking a single question. For example, Sherman (1980) observed that the very act of making a prediction about one's future behavior can bring future behavior in line with one's predictions. Similarly, Greenwald, Carnot, Beach, and Young (1987) demonstrated that asking respondents whether they intended to vote increased the likelihood of voting. In the consumer domain, Morwitz, Johnson, and Schmittlein (1993) reported that being asked a question about one's intention to buy a car or a personal computer increased the likelihood of actual purchases over the next six months.

Fitzsimons and Moore (2008) review the evidence for this "question-behavior effect" in their target article and discuss possible underlying processes. Going beyond a summary of the evidence, they highlight a potentially troublesome implication: Do questions about risky behaviors increase the likelihood that respondents subsequently engage in these behaviors? If so, asking questions about smoking, drug use or unsafe sex practices may have undesirable consequences, posing new ethical challenges for social science research. Three commentaries discuss this suggestion and the underlying processing assumptions. Sherman (2008) notes that most survey questions about undesirable behaviors pertain to past rather than future behavior and raises conceptual and methodological issues that deserve attention in future research. Spangenberg, Greenwald, and Sprott (2008) address Fitzsimons and Moore's processing assumptions and offer an alternative account in terms of ideomotor action. Finally, Gollwitzer and Oettingen (2008) discuss the question-behavior effect from an action control perspective and highlight variables that may moderate the

impact of questions on later action, identifying issues for future research. A response by Moore and Fitzsimons (2008) completes this Research Dialogue, which touches on numerous topics addressed in earlier issues, from impulsive behavior (Strack, Werth, & Deutsch, 2006) to nonconscious influences (Dijksterhuis, Smith, van Baaren, & Wigboldus, 2005) and the nature of free will (Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, & Vohs, 2008).

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