



Defensible Preferences and the Public: Commentary on “Measuring Constructed Preferences Towards a Building Code” by Payne, Bettman and Schkade

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The adoption of Payne et al.’s proposed building code for preference construction would indeed be likely to result in more “defensible” valuations—yet, unfortunately, more defensible valuations may not resolve the EPA administrator’s problem. Suppose that research participants carefully consider the complex information presented by the researcher, including information they may otherwise never think of, make all the relevant trade-offs they may otherwise never make, and report valuations that clearly favor project A over project B. Based on this information, the administrator allocates scarce resources to project A—only to encounter an outcry of public protest. Chances are that the defensible valuations obtained under optimal conditions will often not be the valuations that the general public arrives at haphazardly, under less informed conditions, or in response to a public discourse driven by interest groups. The recommendation, “the more that measured preferences are to play a role in an important decision, e.g., a public policy decision, the greater weight should be given to the better constructed preferences” (p. 35), highlights a thorny issue of democratic process: Should we ignore citizens’ preferences because we trust they wouldn’t hold them if they only had thought about the issue more carefully, as evidenced by the defensibly constructed preferences reported by our research participants?

The archeological approach to preference assessment, geared towards “uncovering values that may be hidden but are assumed to exist” (p. 4) tries to describe the preference distribution “out there.” Hence, survey researchers are worried about instrument effects that may “distort” citizen inputs. In contrast, the constructive approach to preference assessment deliberately uses features of the research instrument to guide respondents in the construction of “defensible” values, values that do not reflect the distribution of preferences in a population that was never exposed to the research instrument. An overwhelming body of psychological research documents that preferences are nearly always constructed, thus rendering the archeological project futile and lending credence to a constructive approach: When preferences are constructed anyway, shouldn’t we ensure that their construction is defensible? Yet, a program that lends respondents a helpful hand in figuring

out what their input into a public decision process ought to be raises questions of democratic process that go far beyond psychological theorizing. These questions are compounded by the fact that most influences of the research instrument are subtle enough to escape respondents' awareness, moving responses in ways that cannot be achieved by explicit persuasive arguments (Schwarz, 1996).

There are no easy answers to these issues. Facing similar problems with regard to potential biases in survey questionnaires, some researchers have obtained the input of opposing interest groups to legitimate their research instruments (cf. Schuman, 1986). No matter how carefully balanced our instruments are, however, the "defensible preferences" obtained by following Payne et al.'s building code are likely to deviate from the preference distribution in the public at large. If more defensible preferences are also more defensible inputs into a public decision process is therefore not only a question of their architectural quality, but a value question of democratic process. Unfortunately, the latter may eventually cause the EPA administrator more nightmares than the former.

References

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- Schwarz, Norbert. (1996). *Cognition and Communication: Judgmental Biases, Research Methods and the Logic of Conversation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.