

Perceiving Security: A word of caution on the ethics of surveys

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Research proposals on security sometimes involve plans to examine people's perceptions of security. Innocuous though these may seem – especially compared to much security-related research which involves the development of devices for spying on people, for mining social networking sites, or the construction and testing of dangerous devices of one sort or another- surveys are less 'innocent' and straightforward than they may first appear. In particular, the moral and political questions that they raise can be surprisingly complex and knotty.

For example, research into people's feelings of security or insecurity can readily affect national political campaigns, if deployed at a sensitive moment. The media is very interested in these surveys (which it will report in the most sensational manner possible), and academics are naturally interested in publicity for their work and their institutions. Indeed, they are increasingly required to seek out media attention for their work in order to secure their jobs and the prospects of their graduate students. So, even at this rather superficial level, it is fairly easy to see that surveys of people's feelings of security or insecurity can be explosive in ways that were neither intended nor foreseen by those who commissioned and paid for the research, or those who carried it out.

1) Let me start with the importance of thinking about the possible **USE and DISSEMINATION** of survey data, given that security is a nationally sensitive political issue everywhere, and invariably plays a significant role in democratic elections. Depending on how it is conducted, and on the questions used, research into perceptions of security can favour or disfavour different social and political actors – for example, governments v. opposition parties; employers v. unions; the police v. ethnic minorities. In short, security is a **competitive** political issue of enormous salience, and the centre of a great deal of fraught feelings, manipulation by politicians, interest groups and so on. This inevitably affects the ethics of survey research and its distribution in ways that go beyond the accuracy and impartiality of the methodologies involved.

2) A second worry concerns the **Impact of Repeated Surveys** on people's feelings of insecurity, and of their perception of the importance of security relative to other political and moral issues (education, healthcare, the reduction of poverty, aid to developing countries and so on). In short, a second ethical concern raised by surveys of people's perceptions of security concerns the likelihood and results of '*observation effects*' from repeated surveys, rather than the ethics and politics of distributing the results.

2a) At one level these worries are *methodological* – because it is important that the surveys do not, cumulatively or individually, end up constructing (or influencing) the very sentiments and concerns that they purport to find. This is a non-trivial methodological problem, and really good interviewers and statisticians probably have ways of detecting it, (based on extensive knowledge of other social scientific research in the area they are considering) and ways of avoiding it. Inexperienced and naïve researchers won't, nor will they have the detailed social scientific knowledge that is necessary to cope properly with other methodological issues – such as appropriate sample size and characteristics relative to a given topic, the scientifically best formulation of questions (hugely important, as these are known dramatically to affect answers on sensitive topics), coding, aggregation, interpretation etc.

2b) However, the questions raised by the possibility of observation-effects are not purely scientific. They are, importantly, *ethical* also. We live in societies with deep social divisions and conflicts of interest. These are often inseparable from sad facts about the past of our countries – many of which threw off dictatorships in our own life times, many of which denied women the vote until very recently, and most of which are marked by the legacies of colonialism, anti-Semitism, brutal suspicion of trade unions and workers, as well as new forms of racial and religious intolerance. This forms the background against which the EU, quite rightly, wants to find out not only what will make people be more secure, but will make them feel more secure – since both are relevant to legitimacy in democratic countries.

As is well known, people's feelings of security and wellbeing reflect their expectations, and their comparison group – normally, people rather like themselves. That is why, for example, poor people typically have no idea what the top range of income is in their society, and are likely to have little sense of differential life-expectancy, quality of life differentials and so on. The inverse is also true. Any survey about feelings, therefore, needs to consider the nature of the information that people have, and its adequacy, if these surveys are meant to figure in ethically acceptable policy judgements. It will also be necessary to consider the problem of *adaptive preferences* and of the *asymmetric impact* of pleasures and pains on people's feelings of wellbeing (or security) too, as these are likely to have important implications for the weight we should attach to people's feelings when deciding what it is morally desirable to do.

Adaptive preferences can be thought of as a form of 'conditioning' : we adapt our desires and expectations to our circumstances, especially where these do not look like things we can alter or escape. So, girls often adopt ideas about what they should want and should feel which reflect the idea that girls are worth less than boys, because that is what their society or family endorse. And, as the U.S. Supreme Court recognised, when striking down legislation requiring racial segregation in public schools in the American South, the effects of segregation on children's self-perceptions and expectations can be hugely damaging. (Research by Gunnar Myrdal was cited in its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, explaining why mandated segregation is inconsistent with equality before the law). *Asymmetry* comes from the well-established fact that we suffer more from a quantum of pain than we get pleasure from the same quantum of pleasure. To lose a euro hurts us more, whatever our income level, than gaining a euro gives us pleasure.

What does this mean for surveys on feelings of security? Roughly, that people who are amongst the best protected and most secure in our society are likely to have expectations of security much higher

than those of other people; that any diminution in their security will likely have a disproportionate influence on their feelings of insecurity (because of the asymmetry between losing and gaining), and can leave them feeling insecure even though they are still leading lives which are very, very much more secure than those of other people. In short, if we go on feelings alone, we might end up thinking that middle class people lead lives that are more insecure than those of people whose lives are shorter, and more scarred by violence to themselves, their friends and neighbours, their possessions.

Moreover, we are likely radically to underestimate the actual dangers and threats facing poorer people, both because these attract less media attention, (and therefore affect our beliefs and sentiments less), and because people tend to protest only when things get worse than usual, and this may disguise the gravity of what counts as normal. *In short, care is needed that surveys do not simply reproduce, in 'scientific' form, feelings and expectations which are the product of social divisions that we have no reason to endorse ethically, and whose consequences for politics and policy may be hard to endorse ethically too.*

Let me give a provocative **example**, just to illustrate my concerns : if surveys ask about security, but are phrased in ways that lead people to think about nuclear arms rather than domestic violence, you may have results which give no guide at all to the actual threats to life and limb suffered by people who are regularly attacked by their partners. If you ask in ways that mean respondents do not think about rape (which is very much a taboo topic for men, and still taboo for many women to mention), then you will not pick up on the fact that it is remarkably frequent, but may end up with results which imply that the most serious problem facing a bunch of rape victims is war in the Middle East, or theft at the local grocery store.

In short, the methodological problems have ethical, not just scientific, significance, particularly if we consider that repeat surveys may themselves lead people to think that their security situation **MUST** be bad, if all these questions are being asked about it, *and* bad in ways that could motivate surveys (ie, bad not because there are lots of grocery store thefts near where they live, or because their husband beats them up, but because of something grander - 'Islam', 'immigrants', 'war' 'terrorism' etc). In short, the ethics of repeat surveys into people's feelings of insecurity need care – because while it can seem *obvious* that these are desirable, even required from a democratic perspective, the political and methodological aspects of surveys quickly show that their ethical implications are more complex than they first appear.

2c) Incidentally, these ethical complexities arise in ways and for reasons which are intimately related to **philosophical critiques of Utilitarianism**: because the injunction to count everyone's preferences 'for one and none for more than one', as Bentham put it, only has equality-promoting outcomes in certain specific circumstances, and may actually lead to deeply inegalitarian results, as Bentham subsequently realised. For example, if the preferences of slaves for enfranchisement are less strong than those of slave-owners to keep their slaves, (because of adaptive preferences on both sides, and the asymmetry of gains and losses), it is possible that counting each person as one, and none for more than more than one, might still support the conclusion that the wellbeing (or security) of that society requires slavery, not enfranchisement.

This difficulty with utilitarianism is very well known amongst moral and political philosophers, (including ones who still use some form of Utilitarianism) – so my ethical concerns with surveys here

do not depend on any peculiar moral positions or knowledge, but on the application to research on security of very well established ethical ideas and findings, in some cases going back centuries.

3) It is also worth considering some **solutions** to the need both to have information on people's understanding of security issues, their perceptions of security as well as the relevant facts about the risks and dangers they face. These are only suggestions, but I hope that they might be helpful, or suggest other ways of handling these problems.

3a) Surveys of feelings should generally be accompanied by some report (even if based on the secondary literature or established findings, rather than new research) of *relevant facts* which can be used to consider the moral and political significance (as well as the scientific) significance of the survey findings. Moreover, the reasons for conducting a *survey* should be explained, (as there are other ways of finding out what people think or believe – including extrapolations from their behaviour, from what they say and write in different contexts, and so on), and reasons for producing *another* survey should also be explained, given the amount of publicly available survey data already in existence. For example, it is worth considering whether a major project or research would be affected by the results of a survey on people's feelings of security and, conversely, of asking whether there would be any criteria which would make it undesirable or inadvisable to fund a survey on security? In short, criteria that would help to explain the acceptability/desirability of security research in the 'hard' sciences have counterparts in the social sciences, and these should be made explicit in proposals in ways that can be assessed and verified.

3b) Deliberative polling on security, if conducted by professionals, may provide a better way of examining the subjective aspects of security than regular polls.

Deliberative polling is very expensive and hard to organise, because it requires taking a fairly large group of people (though not as large as in normal polls), selected to be representative for the topic of the survey, and then keeping them together for several days. Their initial views are polled, then they are subject to fairly extensive information, discussion and debate on issues relevant to the subject of the survey, and another later poll is taken. Each poll is then analysed, as are the differences and similarities between the two polls. The standard work on deliberative polling is by James Fishkin, (USA), who has conducted polls in Europe, including Brussels, as well as in America, but there are now several people in the UK who have used these techniques to gauge public opinion on taxation, and on the funding of healthcare.

The theory and practice of deliberative polling has advanced since I last read about it. I have some reservations about the supposedly democratic implications of these polls, which I think can be exaggerated. Still, what they do is important if you are concerned with trying to get behind immediate unthinking reactions, which may be quite unstable (ie. liable to change quickly and in arbitrary ways) and if you want to examine the information base on which people are reaching their decisions, their awareness of relative alternatives, their estimation of probabilities, their priorities, ambivalences and so on. In that sense, deliberative polls capture some of the ideas about legitimacy involved in deliberative conceptions of democracy – where the quality of reasoning and information, the willingness to engage in justification and to address people's moral beliefs and ideals, not just their self-interest, are all considered important to the legitimacy of collective decisions. (David

Held's *Models of Democracy* is useful for distinguishing 'elitist' or Schumpeterian ideas of democracy – now generally held to be ethically inadequate- with rather more substantial ideas about the differences between democratic and undemocratic government.)

Deliberative polls aren't a substitute for normal surveys, not least because of their expense, constraints on their size and the difficulties getting representative samples. But they can, along with other forms of research, help to give us some of the information we need in order adequately to formulate and interpret surveys, and they can produce striking and important information in their own right. So, if the Commission seriously seeks to promote research into people's feelings of security as part of its funding of security, deliberative polls would seem to be worth attention.

4) I hope that I have said enough to explain my anxiety, then, about surveys which consider people's ideas about what is **private rather than public**, and about the ways that these may be used by scientists seeking to promote '**privacy by design**'. Without belabouring the point, different social groups are likely to identify and value privacy rather differently, and different political and moral ideas may lead intelligent, informed, upstanding citizens to disagree quite fundamentally on what is or is not private, and what is or is not public. (If you want an example, just look at the Devlin-Hart debate on the Wolfenden Report which advocated legalising homosexuality in the UK; or consider debates on abortion).

There is a spatial dimension to the public/private distinction but, above all, it is often thought of as marking the limits of legitimate state action in ways that do not map neatly onto geographical ideas about privacy. Again, care needs to be taken not to end up with 'scientific' surveys of people's ideas or beliefs which simply replicate the views of a favoured sample or – even worse- reflect prejudiced ideas about who does or does not *deserve* privacy, or who does or does not *need* it. Because the different security reviews tend to treat privacy in terms of legal requirements on data protection and surveillance, political and moral disputes over the nature and value of privacy tend not to get much attention. In short, surveys of people's ideas about the public/private distinction are likely to be much more complex methodologically and ethically than they first appear. If anything of real importance (standards for CCTV and other technologies etc.) hangs on the results of these surveys, it will be essential that their relevant methodological, moral, and political aspects get adequate attention.