

# Evasive Responding in Interview Settings of Limited Privacy

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## Abstract

The objective of this study is to investigate how the lack of privacy due to the presence of other persons during the interview affects the way of responding. The emphasis of this investigation is the extent to which the lack of privacy stimulates evasive instead of substantial responding. It is also taken into account whether present other persons interfere during the interview or not. Two different strategies are applied. Firstly, the overall amount of evasive responding is considered, regardless of the type of questions involved. Secondly, the focus is on evasive responding on the question about the household income as an example of a highly threatening question. Multivariate logistic regression analyses are performed to test whether the presence of other persons and the interferences by present other persons non-spuriously affect the mode of responding. The results indicate that the presence of other persons is (statistically) influential only when these present others interfere. They indicate also that even with one of the most threatening questions the substantial relevance of any situational factors is almost not existent.

## 1. Respondents' reactions to limited privacy

Personal interviews constitute a formal conversation between the respondent and the interviewer. Ideally, this conversation involves no other person (Blair, 1979:134; Martin, 1984:273; McCrossan, 1991). This ideal condition, however, is usually realized in only about two thirds of all interviews in social science research (Reuband, 1984, 1987; Mohr, 1986; Hartmann, 1991b, 1994; see also Silver et al., 1986 and Lutynska, 1969). The absence of other persons, e.g. spouse, children, relatives, friends or neighbors is essential to preserve the privacy of the situation. If we expect respondents to give highly personal information we should make sure that no other person, aside from the interviewer, will get access to this information.

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Conducting the interview in a situation where no other person is present, almost completely guarantees the necessary privacy. It is certainly violated, if other persons are present (cf. Hartmann, 1991a: 29; also Esser, 1986:326).

If privacy in the interview situation is limited through the presence of other persons, respondents may react in a variety of ways. Presence of other persons may affect the respondent's choice between different responses options as well as the respondent's willingness for cooperative and truthful responding<sup>2</sup>. Research on the presence of other parties is usually concerned with the former type of reaction. It is commonly assumed thereby that the presence of other persons leads respondents to distort their responses. Distortion means that they will give answers which differ from those which they would give in a totally private interview situation.<sup>3</sup> Respondents may for instance orient their answers towards what the other person presumably approves of (cf. Esser, 1984:50; Hartmann, 1991a:132) or towards what the other person presumably holds true (cf. Reuband, 1984:137).

Respondents may also react to presence of other persons by avoiding to provide a substantial response. They may for instance refuse to answer, answer "Don't know" or choose the middle alternative (if available). In this instance, the researcher gets no information about the respondent's true standing or situation. To the extent to which evasive responding relates to the respondent's true standing or opinion it may bias the results of any analysis based on valid responses only, including those on methodological issues (as for instance response distortions). Thus, the problems raised by non responses are by no means less serious than those imposed by response distortions.

In the following I investigate how the lack of privacy due to the presence of other persons during the interview affects the way of responding. The emphasis of this investigation is the extent to which the lack of privacy stimulates evasive instead of substantial responding. I also take into account whether other persons interfere during the interview or not. If other persons do not interfere, respondents may not be aware of their presence and respond as in a more private interview setting. I apply two different strategies. Firstly, I look at the overall amount of evasive responding, regardless of the type of questions involved. Secondly, I focus on such questions which are known to elicit non-valid responses. This is true for most of the so-called threatening questions.<sup>4</sup> Among the most threatening are the questions about one's income.

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<sup>2</sup>A more detailed overview of the various response effects associated with third-party presence which might be expected with different interview settings is given in the recent theoretical development provided by Hofhuis (1995).

<sup>3</sup>The existence of response distortions is usually established through the comparison of the response distributions of respondents interviewed under different conditions. This approach ignores that the presence of other persons during the interview constitutes no random event but relates to objective characteristics of the respondent. Thus, any response effect might be spurious. For a more detailed discussion of this argument see Aquilino (1993) and Hartmann (1994).

<sup>4</sup>For a definition see Bradburn and Sudman (1979:64-65).

## 2. Data and general procedures

All analyses are based on data from the German General Social Surveys.<sup>5</sup> Although by now data are available till 1994, I rely on three of these survey only: 1986, 1988 and 1990. There are two reasons for this restriction: first, information on interference of present others has been collected only until 1990, second, information concerning the income of the household has only been gathered from 1986 onward. Data from these three surveys were pooled for multivariate analyses, differences between surveys are modeled by including an appropriate interaction term if necessary.

Deviating from the standard practice, I will focus not on valid, but primarily on non-valid information. Responses within the frame of the provided response options are usually considered valid, whilst responses aside from this scheme constitute non-valid responses or, phrased more technically, "missing values". Some missing values are due to refusals to answer, others are due to "don't know" responses and in some cases we simply have no information about why we lack valid information. This last type of missing response is usually subsumed under the heading "no answer", but this does not imply that the lack of information is caused by the respondent, the interviewer might simply have forgotten to check the appropriate category in the questionnaire. Although interviewer misbehavior of this kind may produce missing values, it is almost certainly not the predominant cause, as the well known relation between degree of threat involved in a question and the respective portion of missing values suggests. Thus, it seems plausible to take a missing value as an indicator that a respondent answered evasively.

Evasive responding is assumed to be more likely in interview settings of limited privacy. A first check of this hypothesis may rely on a comparison of different interview settings. Although such a comparison can provide some empirical evidence (see Hartmann, 1995), it generally suffers from the weakness that it does not prevent against spurious effects or at least fails to demonstrate the non-spuriousness of effects. Thus, a multivariate approach is definitely more appropriate.

In the following, I almost exclusively focus on the results from different logistic regression analyses. The general rationale of my analyses is to proceed stepwise. First, all variables are introduced which are theoretically linked to evasive responding to a certain question. In a second step, I introduce those variables which are likely to influence whether other persons are present during the interview or not. Both steps are followed by including all relevant interaction terms among the variables introduced in that step. After all these adjustments have been made, it is checked

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<sup>5</sup>The German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) has been done regularly every two years since 1980 and (providing a new baseline for the unified Germany) also in 1991. Information on the presence of third parties has been recorded for all surveys except those conducted in 1991 and 1992, information about interference of third parties only until 1990. The ALLBUS studies are available at the Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung in Cologne, Germany.

whether the presence of others, especially the presence of the spouse and interferences of others still exert some influence on evasive responding.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Presence of other persons

As the rationale outlined above requires adjusting for factors potentially influencing whether other persons are present during the interview or not, the first analysis aims to "explain" presence of other persons. As had been shown in Hartmann (1994), the presence of others usually means simply the presence of the spouse. It has also been shown for married respondents that the risk that the spouse will be present increases with the duration of the interview and for respondents with unemployed spouses. Following the notion of availability outlined in Hartmann (1994), I expect that the presence of other persons is more likely for those respondents who are living with other adults in a common household, for those who are married, for those whose spouse is not employed. If other persons are not present at the very beginning of the interview, the risk that some other person will be present increases with the duration of the interview.

Table 1: Logistic Regression of Presence of Third Parties

Variable	Presence of third parties	
	EXP (B)-Effects	-2 Log LR
Living with other adults	3.93	251.807**
Married	1.94	85.595**
Spouse without job	1.45	42.176**
Duration of interview (in minutes)	1.01	46.459**
Survey 1988	0.51	117.819**
Survey 1990	0.71	30.543**
(Constant)	(0.06)	
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup> / Model	9.1%	978.948**
Number of respondents	8903	

Data: German General Social Survey, Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS), 1986-1990

\* significant at the 5 percent level

\*\* significant at the 1 percent level

As the presence of others constitutes a dichotomous variable a logistic regression approach was employed. The results are given in Table 1. As separate analyses

provided almost identical results, the data of three different surveys have been pooled. Difference in baseline have been accounted for by including two dummy variables for the surveys in 1988 and in 1990. Thus, the first survey (1986) serves as a reference group. Although the portion of explained variation is only 9.1%, all hypothesized variables appear to affect presence of others to a statistically significant degree and should therefore be controlled in later analyses on evasive responding.

### 3.2 The overall tendency to respond evasively

The next analysis investigates how the presence of other persons affects the relative frequency of different types of non-valid responses. I decided to rely on the relative instead of the absolute frequency because, due to filtering, not all respondents were presented with all questions. Since the respondents who were asked more questions had more opportunity to reveal a tendency toward evasive responding it was necessary to standardize with respect to the number of questions which were presented to each respondent.

According to the hypothesis that lack of privacy may lead to evasive responses, I expected that persons interviewed alone would, on average, give fewer non-valid responses than persons who were interviewed in the presence of others. Similarly respondents interviewed in the presence of a silent other should give fewer non-valid responses than respondents interviewed in the presence of a non-silent other. The test of this hypothesis was accomplished by a simple comparison of the arithmetic means of the individual relative overall frequencies of various kinds of non-valid responses between the two groups. The results of the comparison are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Evasive Responses and the Presence of Other Persons**  
(mean of individual response percentages)

Overall percentage of questions	Interview situation			Interference of present others		
	No other person present	Some other present	t-Value	None	Sometimes or often	t-Value
With refusal to answer	0.74	0.83	2.11 *	0.71	0.93	-3.15**
Answered "don't know"	2.27	2.14	-1.13	1.97	2.28	-1.70
With otherwise missing response	1.17	1.14	-0.40	1.12	1.15	-0.24
Number of respondents	2112	900	-	434	457	-

Data: German General Social Survey, Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS), 1990

\* significant at the 5 percent level

\*\* significant at the 1 percent level

The comparison of the average percentage of evasive responses shows that the presence of others has a significant effect only on the tendency to refuse an answer. Nevertheless, the average refusal tendency appears to be rather low in both settings with 0.74 resp. 0.83 percent. The presence of other persons appears to be unrelated to the tendency to answer "don't know" and to the percentage of responses missing due to some other reason ("no answers"). Taking also into account whether the other persons present interfered or not shows similar results: only the tendency to refuse to respond is significantly related to the interference of present others (for details see also Hartmann, 1995).

The differences between the average refusal tendency in different interview settings, however, are almost exclusively due to the differences in readiness to refuse to answer at least once. If no other person is present during the interview, 48.3% of all respondents will refuse at least one response, but 52.4% of those respondents who were interviewed in the presence of some other person. With respect to the interference of present others the differences are even larger: 47.0% of the respondents interviewed in the presence of a silent other, but 57.7% of those interviewed in the presence of some person who interfered during the interview refused at least one response. Aside from this greater readiness to refuse at least once, there is no difference in the average proportion of refusals between different interview settings.

A logistic regression analysis was performed to check whether the presence of other persons and the interferences of present others have non-spurious effects on the readiness to refuse at least once when the factors influencing the presence of others are controlled. Readiness to refuse appears to be related to household size, having a spouse who is not employed and duration of the interview but not to marital status. After controlling these factors, there is no additional effect of the presence of other persons on readiness to refuse, but still a significant ( $\alpha=0.01$ ) effect of the interferences by present other persons. The proportion of variance explained by this model, however, is dreadfully low with 0.8% only.

The lack of predictive relevance might be due to the crude measurement of the dependent variable as well as to the omission of relevant predictor variables. Neither the average refusal tendency nor the readiness to refuse at least once take into account the specific questions which have been refused. It is known, however, that not all questions elicit evasive responses to the same extent. Thus, it seems quite reasonable to assume that the lack of privacy does not lead to evasive responses with all kinds of questions but especially with those questions which are threatening. Often, answers to such questions are not only given rather reluctantly, but also refused.

Till now only little is known about the causes of evasive responding. Questions may be threatening because they refer to attitudes or behaviors which are usually not discussed in the public. But the degree of threat involved in a question may also depend on the true standing of a respondent (cf. Bradburn and Sudman, 1979:64; Hartmann, 1991a:49). Thus, evasive responding may also be viewed as part of a strategy to avoid to give information about ones true standing with highly salient

questions. As not all questions are equally salient for all respondents it may depend on the topic of the question to which other characteristics of respondents the evasive responding to a particular question relates. This would also imply that a general model for explaining evasive responding will almost probably not include all variables which are theoretically linked to evasive responding.

### **3.3 Evasive responding on the question about household income**

Among the questions traditionally considered as threatening is the question concerning one's income. With persons not living as singles it is usual to distinguish between their personal income and the income of the household they belong to. In the German General Social Survey, information about both kinds of income, personal and household income, is gathered by two questions. First, the respondents are simply asked for the net income. If a respondent refuses to answer this open question he/she is presented a list of income categories and asked to indicate which category applies.<sup>6</sup> To do this the respondent has to name the letter of the corresponding category. These letters uniquely identify the different income categories, but they are not presented in alphabetic order. Thus, no one who is not familiar with this categorical list can infer one's income from the chosen letter.

Whether respondents are ready to answer the first question on income or only the closed follow-up question or refuse to answer this question at all, may be influenced by whether other persons are present or not, and by whether present others interfere during the interview or not. Reluctance to answer the income question may also be caused by other factors. As these factors have to be adjusted before investigating the situational factors to allow for a non-spurious interpretation of the latter they need to be specified as completely as possible. As the specification of factors theoretically linked to evasive responding is easier with the question on household income I rely on this question.

Without going into deeper details it seems plausible to assume that married persons or those living with other adult persons (18 years of age and older) may feel reluctant to provide not only information about themselves but also (indirectly) about the other members of the household without being especially authorized to do so. As women in west German families are often not employed but participate from the partner's income they probably think the question on the household income refers to the income of their spouse. Higher educated<sup>7</sup> persons (who probably also have some-

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<sup>6</sup>This technique of presenting a closed question as a follow-up to persons who refuse to answer the open income question was first applied in 1984 with respect to respondents' personal income. In 1986 this procedure was extended to the question about the household income. Respondents living alone were only asked about their household income.

<sup>7</sup>Persons are distinguished according to whether they completed school with a degree qualifying for university either in general or for a specific faculty only (Abitur resp. Fachhochschulreife) or not.

what larger earnings) probably face greater problems revealing the income of their household than respondents with lower education. Respondents in households of self-employed persons will probably have the same problem. Respondents without gainful employment may prefer not to reveal other sources of income.

As the question concerning household income is asked in a two stage procedure I separately analyze evasive responding at either stage. Since the income itself is not of interest in this context, I distinguish at both stages only whether a valid answer had been provided or not.<sup>8</sup> A summary about the amount of evasive responding on the initial open and the final closed questions is given in Table 3. The table presents results of three German General Social Surveys from 1986 to 1990.

**Table 3:** Evasive Responding to the Question on the Household Income (Percentages)

	1986	1988	1990
Initial open question	39.0	55.7	44.9
(Number of respondents)	(3095)	(3052)	(3051)
Closed follow-up question	30.3	52.5	58.3
(Number of respondents)	(1206)	(1701)	(1369)

Data: German General Social Survey, Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS), 1986-1990

A look at the details in Table 3 shows that nearly one half of all respondents did not give a valid answer to the open question about the income of their household. The persons who initially refused to answer were then presented with the closed follow-up question. As before, respondents could either provide a valid answer or refuse again. The percentage of evasive responses to the final closed question is (with the exception of the 1990 survey) clearly lower than to the initial open question.

In order to investigate how the presence of others and the interferences of present others influence evasive responses to the two questions on household income logistic regression analyses were performed with the data from the German General Social Surveys from 1986 to 1990. The results of these analyses are given in Table 4. To prevent against spurious effects all variables assumed to be theoretically linked to evasive responding of the income question and all related interactions are introduced before the situational factors. Likelihood ratio tests were applied to test whether certain interaction terms or additional variables should be added to the initial model which only contained the variables assumed to be theoretically relevant. The log likelihood statistics for each of the partial models are also included in Table 4.

<sup>8</sup>An explicit coding of refusals had not been used before the 1988 survey. A look at the frequency tables of the income question coded in more detail, however, showed that most non-valid information is due to refusals, almost none to "don't know" responses and very few to "no answer". As the lack of valid information is mainly due to refusal the heading "refusal" seems appropriate although it is - strictly speaking - not correct.



**Table 4: Evasive Responses to the question about the household income - Logistic Regression**

Variable	Evasive response to initial open question		Evasive response to closed follow-up question	
	Exp (B)-Effects	-2 Log LR	Exp (B)-Effects	-2 Log LR
Partial model:		172.08**		25.54**
Female	1.13	7.41**	1.00	0.00ns
Higher educated	1.29	22.69**	1.19	4.92*
Self-employed	1.65	52.86**	1.28	6.91**
Living with other adults	1.82	73.63**	1.45	13.33**
Married	0.86	5.74*	0.75	10.08**
Partial model:		159.50**		21.39**
1988 Survey	2.08	201.82**	1.75	57.63**
Partial model:		27.37**		86.28**
1990 Survey	1.38	25.80**	2.35	83.24**
* Not gainfully employed				
Partial model:		6.40**		4.85*
Interference of others	1.26	11.77**	1.24	4.94*
Partial model:		15.61**		0.18ns
1988 Survey	0.65	15.61**	0.94	0.18ns
* Presence of spouse				
(Constant)	(0.36)		(0.50)	
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup> / Total model	3.1%	380,951**	2.5%	138.236**
Number of respondents	8808		4039	

Data: German General Social Survey, Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS), 1986-1990

\* significant at the 5 percent level

\*\* significant at the 1 percent level

As the data for the analyses were pooled from three different surveys, the first additional variables and interaction terms which needed to be assessed after inclusion of theoretically relevant variables were those modeling differences between surveys: the 1988 survey had significantly larger portions of evasive responding in general, the 1990 survey only with respondents who were not gainfully employed. After adjusting these study-specific effects it was checked whether one of the situational factors still significantly influenced evasive responding. Deviating from earlier expectations neither the presence of some other person nor the presence of the spouse appeared to be influential, but only whether present others interfered or not. In a final step I then

checked for the possibility that the impact of situational factors may be different in the three years. This, however, was true only for the presence of the spouse which turned out to be influential only in 1988. After all the statistical relevant variables and interaction terms had been identified in this manner, a simultaneous analysis of these variables was performed. The effects of each variable (EXP(B)) as well as the Log likelihood statistics for these variables in the simultaneous model are also given in Table 4.

A more detailed look at the results of the logistic regression presented in Table 4 shows, that the chances of an evasive (instead of a substantive) response to the initial open question are higher for women, for respondents with higher education, for those who or whose spouse are self-employed and for those living with other adults (including steady partner of presently not married persons). The chances of an evasive response are also higher for respondents of the 1988 survey and those of the 1990 survey who were not gainfully employed at the time of the interview. The chances for an evasive instead of a substantive response are lower only for married respondents. Interferences of present others significantly increase the chance of an evasive response to the initial open question, but other situational factors appear not to be influential in general. The presence of spouse exhibits an additional effect on evasive responding only with the 1988 survey, decreasing the generally lower chances for married persons even further when they were interviewed in the presence of their spouse.

For analyzing evasive responding to the final closed question on household income only those respondents were considered who refused to answer the initial open question. The pattern of effects for evasive responding to the closed question looks almost identical to that for evasive responding to the initial question. There are only two difference to be noted: first, there is no effect of respondent's gender on evasive responding to the closed question and secondly, there is also no additional decrease in the chances for an evasive response for respondents interviewed in the presence of their spouse in the 1988 survey. As before with the open question only whether present other persons interfered or not turned out to provide a statistically significant influence on the chances for an evasive response. Statistical significance, however, does not mean substantial relevance: the explanatory power of both models is very low at best with only 3.1% and 2.5% of the variation explained.

#### **4. Summary and conclusion**

Interview settings of limited privacy may not only be expected to lead to response distortions, but also to evasive responding. To test this hypothesis I performed two different analyses involving an overall measure of tendencies to provide evasive responses and the question about household income as an example of a threatening behavioral question. The results of the analyses provide only partial support for the initial hypothesis. The main results can be summarized as follows. The overall

tendency and more specifically the readiness to refuse to answer at least once is related to the lack of privacy. Despite statistical significance the substantial relevance as measured by the percentage of explained variation (which is below 1%) is almost not given.

With respect to the question on the household income, I found no effect of the presence of other persons in general when other variables which are theoretically linked to refusal of this question and to the presence of others are controlled first. Only the presence of the spouse turned out to be influential in one year (1988), but the effect is rather supportive by reducing the readiness to refuse the initial open question about household income. The interference by present others non-spuriously affects the readiness to refuse for the initial open as well as for the closed follow-up question on household income. However, it should also be noted that the percentage of explained variation is very small with 3.1% for the open and 2.5% for the closed question. Relying on statistical significance only one may conclude that the presence of other does not increase the refusal rate, but only when present others interfere during the interview. Taking into account also the substantial significance (as measured to some extent by the proportion of explained variation) one is inclined to view these effects as rather unimportant. Most variation still seems to occur randomly, thereby posing no problems with distortions due to differential refusing.

Relying on the results presented above one might argue that if the presence of others and the interference by present others do not substantially affect evasive responding with the question on household income then there is no need to expect distortions with other usually less threatening questions. Such a conclusion, however, would be drawn too early, given the present stage of research on this issue. The most important obstacle is that only little is known about how different types of present others will influence respondent's behavior, and especially how interferences by different types of present others may influence responses. Such an investigation, however, requires not only more detailed information about the relationship between respondent and the other persons being present - as suggested by Taietz (1962) - than is usually recorded but also considerably larger portions of interviews performed in the presence of persons other than the spouse. Survey data as those used in this study can be only of limited value for this purpose as the data are usually collected on substantial issues and standard methodology requires to prevent against the presence of other persons in order to achieve high quality of these data.

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