

**Sampling Community Discourses as a Method
for Assessing “Public Opinion”**

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ABSTRACT

In working with the topics of racial discrimination and household energy reductions it is clear that just measuring attitudes is no longer sufficient. We need a fuller social context to understand what is said about these topics, as the same words can be used for many reasons. I am working with four new methods for “sampling community discourses” on topics such as racial prejudice, to replace or supplement the measurement of attitudes. The initial analysis is whether the talk functions to get someone to do something directly, to get someone to believe the ‘facts’, or whether the talk functions for the establishment or maintenance of social relationships. Many problems remain, especially the representativeness of the sampling and keeping as much of the context of the talk as possible.

We are researching in two areas which have traditionally been measured by “public opinions” or “public attitudes”: racial discrimination, and reducing household energy use. In both cases the traditional focus of research has been to measure attitudes and develop interventions that change people’s attitudes towards these issues. While there are certainly other methods used to study these areas, attitude measurement has been fundamental to the approaches (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Paraskevopoulos, Korfiatis & Pantis, 2003; Sjöberg, 2002).

Increasingly, however, the construct of ‘attitude’ has come under criticism (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1993; Fishben & Ajzen, 1975; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1988; Wetherell, 1998). It is now usually placed within a discursive analysis as a particular way of talking, and the measurement of “an attitude” seen as a misnomer. Attitudes have been highlighted as strategic rather than as givens that exist “within” a person (Guerin, 1994, 2003, 2004). They are not ‘things’ or ‘possessions’ in one’s head, and measuring attitudes is a social influence process rather than a simple readout of an internal process (Guerin, 2001).

Predictions using attitude measurement have also been formally limited in scope to situations in which they are made within a specific social context, although this has not been acknowledged by those using them (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). For example, in the social context of attitudes towards specific candidates in voting in the near future they might be predictive, but in the case of measuring attitudes towards the two main political parties and their philosophies, attitudes are not very predictive of voting outcomes.

The point of these criticisms, which have not usually shown how to build something new, is that we must measure ‘attitudes’ by their strategic functioning in ‘natural conversions’ rather than as point measurements on scales. For example, it has been suggested that expressing a view as an attitude is an easy way to hedge on negative

responses from listeners, as opposed to expressing the same basic proposition as a belief (Guerin, 1994, 2003).

The Functions of Conversational Topics

Situating 'attitudes' within natural conversations becomes more difficult when the criticisms are finished and new research is desired. Most post-criticism research has looked at a very small number of texts (usually conversations) and worked from there (Potter & Wetherell, 1988). While acknowledging the usefulness of this research, which we also do in other contexts, we also still see a potential role for measuring aspects of the larger or population level range of 'attitudes' but with new methodology. This is our aim.

To begin this task, we isolate some of the functions of using language at all, and then look at how the social properties of various ways of talking facilitate or inhibit these broad functions. For example, the forms of talk called rumours have many social properties and affect people differently from the forms of talk we call "telling facts", or even gossip. Rumours can be a source of information but they can also function to enhance social relationships or group organization through their attention-getting properties and their status-enhancing properties (Guerin & Miyazaki, in press).

While there are various approaches to functionality in conversation, we begin with a broad analysis of using language to get someone to do something (in actions), using language to get someone to believe or say something (convincing them of facts), and using language to get someone to begin or maintain a social relationship (or change the status of the relationship in some way). There are variations on how these functions are drawn out analysis (cf. Guerin, 2003a, b, 2004), but they basically cover the main things we do with words.

The importance of analyzing these functions can be seen in a few examples. First, it has been argued elsewhere that a major function of "racist" talk is to entertain or maintain status within groups and social relationships (Guerin, 2003b). This does not

condone such talk or mean it is benign, but it changes the way of thinking about the talk and how we might intervene for changes. Someone who ‘only’ makes jokes of a racist nature, prefaced by hedging with “I’m not racist, but I heard this funny joke...” is not likely to show up as having a negative attitude when measured on a scale or public opinion poll. Even if interviewed about how they think and value other races and cultures, they might show a very ‘positive’ attitude, because their form of insidious racism is through a form of talk not picked up unless all functions are pursued.

As another example of the importance of looking at the broad functions of talk, it has been argued that much of recent conversational analyses takes what seems to be telling or “establishing” facts in conversations at face value, and treats them as one person attempting to convince the other of their version of the world (Guerin, 2004). Instead, many conversations about ‘facts’ or ‘representations’ are really about negotiating social relationships, either beginning, maintaining or changing status within the relationship, either through impressing the listeners or through entertaining them and keeping their attention. This is why the story forms of horror, medical misadventure, rumour, urban legend, celebrity gossip, surprise, bad taste, “bull-shitting”, complaining, atrocity tales, sexual encounter, sick disaster jokes, and shock talk are all so prevalent (Alemán, 2001; Bromley, Shupe & Ventimiglia, 1979; Brukman, 1975; Chapman & Lupton, 1994; Ellis, 1996; Guerin & Miyazaki, in press; Hutchby, 1992; Laforest, 2002; Lockyer & Pickering, 2001; Mechling & Mechling, 1985; Mukerji, 1978).

Putting this into a framework for measuring across larger numbers of people, the idea is to develop methods that can sample the ways in which people use racist talk or talk about energy. Rather than ‘elicit’ attitudes towards race and energy consumption, we need to measure how any conversations of this nature are occurring in ‘natural’ conversations. We like to call this “sampling community discourses’ since what will be found is common across communities rather than a function just of individuals. This is

because of the social functions of such talk—they are not acting like a private language (Guerin, 2001).

To do this we need to analyze samples of ‘natural’ conversations about the topics, or recall of such conversations if necessary, and find out how the topics are being used in those conversations: are they jokes; are they serious discussions of issues in which the speakers try to persuade each other; are they to entertain the group listening; are they gossiping devices? To do this, we must find ways to obtain far more social context for any conversation or text than has been done before. In an extreme case this should be ethnographic in nature, since we need to analyze the social relationships just as much as the words themselves (Guerin, 2004). That is, linguistic or conversational analysis must work as one (sometimes small) part of other social analyses and not by itself (Guerin, 2004).

For example, to add more context when sampling community discourses, we might ask people to think about conversations they have recently had on the water shortage and subsequent power cuts. They could then report the conversational topics arising and then, just as importantly, talk about how the topics were being used in the conversations: were they presented as jokes, serious persuasion of facts attempts, entertainment, conspiracy theories, or as a hint that the listener should take shorter showers in future.

How this initial functional analysis turns out, at least in this rough way, should get us a useful source of information for interventions. If such inquiries about racist talk, for example, showed that 86% of racist conversational talk was about joking and entertainment, then our racism interventions would need to be very different than if 86% was about serious attempts by one party to convince the other about the facts concerning a racial group.

Methods for Sampling Community Discourses

Our initial work will tackle four methods for sampling community discourses for these two topics: Ethnographic, phone surveys with more context, group-discussion based, and tracking a small sample over time.

An Ethnographic Approach

The first method, and probably the best but also the most intensive, is to use a participant observation or ethnographic approach. For this, a researcher or a team of researchers participate in or listen to 'natural' conversations and record as much of the social context as possible. The more ethnographic, meaning the more time they have spent in that community and learning the community dynamics, the better will be the social analyses accompanying the bare words produced.

As an example of this type of method, Kaler (2004) employed five research assistants to keep fieldnotes that recorded 'as accurately and in as much detail as possible', 'everything that you hear people say about AIDS' (p. 287). This included conversations in which the recorders participated, but they were instructed not to instigate conversations about AIDS, just record ones that happened independently of their presence. The aim of this research was to gather the content of what was said rather than the content plus the functionality as suggested here, but the procedures were similar to what we have in mind.

Kaler's discussion of limitations and benefits to the methods are pertinent to the present proposal (p. 287-288). She points out that any effects from conducting an interview (e.g., Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000; Kysan & Couper, 2003) are removed in this approach, which is especially important for sensitive or 'hot' topics. There are no pre-set categories being applied to the data by recorders so the data is kept in a rawer form. On the other hand, the reporters can be selective in what they record and how they record them and tape-recordings will not usually be useable in these contexts, if 'natural' conversations are desired. Also, the sampling depends upon the reporters and their travels, and some groups can be left out. In reply to these points, Kaler mentions that her

reporters did report some fairly sensitive material which did not show their own family networks in a good light, so this can be taken as evidence that they were recording faithfully. For Kaler's study, as well as what we wish to do, getting a representative sample is not the point; the idea is to get as wide a range as possible of views and social contexts rather than trying to sample for all groups and communities. More will be said about this points below.

Extended Phone Survey Approach

Another way to handle these issues would be to continue doing phone surveys but include more about conversations and their social context. Participants could be asked about recent conversations on a topic and to recall as much of the information as possible, as much of the wording as possible, and then asked to explore the social contexts for the conversation. While there are obviously problems with this, especially in recalling conversations and context, notice that the normal attitude survey is already asking people to synthesize all they 'know' about an issue and forge that into one score, which is in many ways more precarious than recall but glossed over as not being a problem because the theory states that people just 'have' attitudes that they somehow internally readout to a questioner. So we are not blind to the problems inherent in such methods, but believe that the problems with 'attitude' surveys are just as bad but have been hidden rather than solved.

Community Group Discussions

A third possible method is to try and reconstruct some of the community discourses by having groups talk about the topics, with the assumption that common discourses occurring in everyday conversations will re-appear in the more focused discussions. If representative samples are required this method is probably not suitable, since selecting people for focus-type groups is usually biased by selection, but for producing a wide range of discourses it could be useful.

Tracking a Small Sample over Time

A final way to sample community discourses is to select a smaller sample but track the changes they go through in their discourses over time, while simultaneously keeping track of the social and political changes that have occurred during this time. Once again there are problems with such a method, but if representativeness is not an issue then we believe the problems are no worse than those for traditional attitude measurements.

As an example, Farmer (1994) had a cohort of 20 adults from a village in Haiti and interviewed them informally each year over at least six years. By doing this, he was able to see the changes in AIDS-talk—how it increased and changed over the period. He related this to political changes that occurred at the same time.

Problems, Solutions and Compromises

There are lots of problems to be overcome with these methods, but we argue that the problems with traditional attitude measurements have been ignored rather than solved. Attitude measurements are treated as straightforward even after older and newer trenchant criticisms (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1993; Fishben & Ajzen, 1975; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1988; Wetherell, 1998). There are several areas of discussion.

Representative Sampling?

One issue is that the methods here, perhaps with the exception of the expanded phone survey, make it difficult to get a sample representative of the population. The main answer to this is that many studies do not aim to get such a sample, and instead work towards getting an exhaustive list of discourses, statements, arguments, rhetorical devices, or whatever. While one cannot be sure that one does have an exhaustive list without a representative sample, one could not be sure either that a representative sample of answers is occurring from a phone survey—the method of questioning might elicit certain answers and not others. For example, long or complex examples might be shied away from during a phone survey because the caller does not want a long answer or

because it is tiresome to repeat long examples on the phone. So, we might not have been getting truly representative samples of attitudes from the phone anyway.

A common method to partially deal with this is to gather new examples until they are repeating what others have already given (and this can then be better fed back into a traditional phone survey with prompts and a representative population sample). One can restrict the sampling to a particular group (as in Farmer's research) or to particular social networks (as in Kaler's research). Both have limitations but so do the traditional methods.

What are 'Natural' Conversations?

I have repeatedly referred to 'natural' conversations being sampled but the extent to which any conversation is natural can be questioned. The ethnographic approach has some limitations if the reporters are participating in the conversation, the interview method of Farmer has more potential to not be 'natural', but the attitude survey is even less natural than either of these. Talk does not happen spontaneously in any case, and there are always motives and agenda involved, so what is probably meant is that 'natural' conversations are ones where the speakers are not expecting any scrutiny of what they say except from the people present, so they do not edit it where there might not otherwise.

Once again, if the researcher is wanting to sample pristine versions of what is said then the interview or focus group methods have some inherent problems because they are not natural, but if the aim is to collect examples of what is typically said then these methods might reproduce such conversational snippets even though they are artificially set up.

Recall of Conversations

The extended phone survey and the tracking over time method (to a lesser extent) also suffer from having participants recall past conversations, and this can introduce biases and selective remembering. To some extent this can be assuaged through getting

the full context of examples and through repeated asking and prompting to improve recall. But it was also argued above that asking someone for their 'attitude' towards an abstract issue is probably just as derivative of what they can quickly recall as these newer methods. So they are probably no worse, even if adjustments are not made to improve the accuracy of what is recalled.

Conclusions

There are problems with traditional attitude measurements that have been ignored for many years. We are attempting to develop some newer measures that take advantage of developments in language analyses linked to social analyses (Guerin, 2004). The idea is to sample the discourses around a topic that appear in communities, and use those as the basis for analysis rather than a point-measurement of 'attitude' or 'strength of belief'. How the conversations function will be of vital importance and this can only be analyzed through such methods and the recording of the conversational social context.

Four potential methods are outlined and although they each have problems, we argued that traditional methods have similar or worse problems that have been ignored rather than solved. Further problems will undoubtedly arise as we test the methods, but we are hopeful that some of the advantages can still be gained even with new problems appearing. The methods will give a better reflection of what people are thinking and talking about the issues, and how that relates to doing things about those issues. It will also be more helpful in developing interventions than just knowing the overall attitude or valuation of a topic.

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