

Whenever a direct question is posed, the human mind immediately goes into “What is the right answer?” mode. This is particularly true in cultures with educational systems that provide rewards for students who produce the right answers. Like Pavlov’s dogs, people are conditioned throughout their entire lives to provide correct answers. This phenomenon causes consumer respondents to endeavor to get the answer right or please the interviewer before they examine their own feelings for an answer that reflects the truth of their feelings or behaviors. Research methodologies that pose direct questions can lead us astray because they cannot overcome these natural workings of the human mind and can actually reinforce the effect of priming.

Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson published a paper titled, “Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes,” in which they document an experiment regarding the effect of priming in research. Female subjects were presented with several pairs of stockings lined up on a table, and were invited to examine them and choose the pair they liked best. The women made their choices and then described the reasons for their preferences, including texture, sheerness and color. In fact, the stockings were absolutely identical.

In this and a host of other studies, Nisbett and Wilson showed that people are often mistaken about the internal causes of their actions and feelings. Although the subjects always gave reasons, the reasons came not from privileged access to the processes that underlie their decisions, but from social conventions, ideas about the way things normally work in such situations, or just plain guesses. When salient and plausible stimuli are not available, people make up reasons and believe in them. In other words, the inner workings of important aspects of the mind, including our own understanding of why we do what we do, are not necessarily knowable to the conscious self.

Priming is a phenomenon that presents considerable fascination for scientists and researchers. Consequently, there is a substantial body of research confirming how the effects of priming should make us wary of conventional research findings. Nearly all of the research supports that the story people construct on the basis of their reasons analysis can misrepresent how they really feel. Researchers have found the feelings people report after analyzing reasons are often

incorrect, in the sense that they lead to decisions that people later regret, do not predict their later behavior very well, and correspond poorly with the opinions of experts.

For example, people in another study who listed reasons about why their relationship was going the way it was were compared with people who did not list reasons. Whose feelings did the best job of predicting longevity of the relationship? It was the latter group, who did not analyze reasons. This is consistent with the notion that when people analyzed reasons, they constructed stories based on faulty data, such as which aspects of the relationship were easiest to put into words, were on their minds, or were consistent with their theories about how they should feel, leading to attitudes that were less well informed than those of people in the control group, who just gave their unanalyzed gut feelings. In effect, the act of posing the questions caused the respondents to prime themselves into predictions that were faulty.

Priming frequently occurs with the mere exposure to words, outside an individual’s awareness, and is often sufficient to influence a respondent’s performance on a variety of tasks, including basic consumer research. Several studies, not requiring any particular insights, have proven to be flawed in subsequent experiments that showed that simple, seemingly innocuous slips in question construction and technique misconstrued the results. Cultural priming also causes people to have mistaken beliefs about the true nature of their feelings and behaviors, particularly when they conflict with cultural rules.

Clearly humans are hard-wired to make up answers to questions with great conviction even though we may not have the slightest idea what the answer truly is. Priming significantly influences the unconscious mind. Through priming, one cue or stimulus facilitates the recognition of, or attention to, another cue. Generally accepted market research methods used for most commercial applications are simply not designed or equipped to overcome this phenomenon.

The need for emotional research and the methodology behind it is grounded in the shortcomings of conventional research to ascertain what is really going on in the consumer’s mind. Emotional research reveals what is happening in the target audience’s emotional brain – the essential “whys” and psychological drivers underlying feelings and decisions related to specific brand behaviors.