

Best practice recommendation: Interviewing on sensitive topics



Context and challenges

Social scientific and economic research into hunting can sometimes require interviews that touch (or explicitly elicit information) on illegal behaviour, or on behaviour that the interviewee might believe to clash with the interviewer's social norms. This can obviously lead to responses that do not reflect the interviewee's actual views or behaviours – and this is relevant for both quantitative and qualitative research. For example, the prevalence of illegal bushmeat hunting might be substantially underestimated, and where such data are included in more complex analyses (whether qualitative or quantitative), it could lead to systematic misinterpretations.

This was an obvious challenge in our cultural and economic examinations of bushmeat hunting in western Serengeti, Tanzania, but also when interviewing local residents of lower Omo, Ethiopia, who have traditionally (and illegally) hunted both large and small game. Additionally, in our European case studies, predator control – especially where this is illegal – is often a very sensitive topic. This might also have more subtle impacts, as interview partners might not feel comfortable expressing their views. It is thus important to create the conditions for participants to be as open as possible.

Best practice approaches – our experience

As a general precondition for our research, we aimed to make our study participants comfortable, by strictly avoiding judgemental (especially negative) statements or utterances. It was important that interviewers were seen as independent and genuinely interested in the views of their interview partners. We assured our participants confidentiality, and in many places, the researchers (or at least their organisations) were known to the participants as non-partisan. In many places, it was also important that the researchers were seen not to belong to a governmental organisation. This facilitated an open atmosphere in which, for example, focus group discussions and personal interviews could take place.

In our large-scale and long-term surveys in Tanzania, we worked with local enumerators who came from and

lived in the study villages. This substantially increased the openness of the study participants with regard to some behaviours that were common practice in the study area, but could have been seen as unacceptable by outsiders, such as the use of bushmeat for food.

In some of our quantitative research, we aimed to gather information on the prevalence of and preferences for hunting. Some of our exploratory work in Tanzania, as well as previous studies, suggested that local residents found it difficult to openly admit to hunting activities or respond to questions such as “Under these conditions, would you go hunting?”, even if the context was portrayed as hypothetical. We used three different approaches to allow participants to express their preferences and state their behaviours without explicitly admitting to hunting.

- First, in a choice experiment that aimed to elicit a household's intentions to hunt if their economic condition changed, we couched the main question in terms of a household making choices over different livelihood options (Fig. 1). Here, hunting was just one of the household activities that together formed a livelihood. Respondents were thus not required to explicitly express their preferences for (or against) hunting. And indeed, we did not find evidence for strategic choices that systematically avoided hunting because it was illegal.







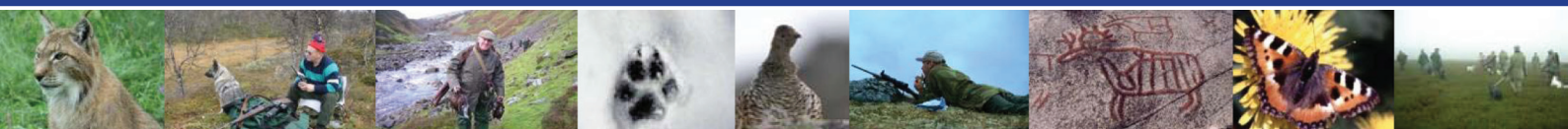
Card 2 (Block 1)	A	B	C
Number of cows 	1	30	0
Wage per month 	Tsh 600,000	Tsh 200,000	No job
Access to microcredit 	No	Yes	Yes
Access to markets 	Yes	No	Yes
Likelihood of being arrested 	0/10	1/10	4/10
Length of hunting trip per year 	6 months	1 week	2 months
Which one would you choose?	[]	[]	[]

Fig. 1: Sample page of choice experiment that asks for hunting preferences as part of a livelihood package



- Second, we used indirect questioning techniques to assess the prevalence of illegal hunting and identify socio-demographic characteristics of households participating in hunting. Specifically, we applied the unmatched-count technique (UCT), which asks survey respondents to indicate how many, but not which, household occupations shown in a card (Fig.2) apply to them. This technique was selected after a pilot study had shown that UCT had clear advantages over other indirect questioning techniques, as it minimized misunderstandings and confusion among respondents, but increased levels of trust and openness. By ensuring anonymity and minimizing question sensitivity, we increased survey response rates and willingness to report illegal activities. However, this technique requires large sample sizes.
- Third, we used protein recall surveys to elicit bushmeat consumption. Here, the use of local enumerators ensured openness (see above), and respondents were willing to answer questions about the provenance of the bushmeat consumed in their household. This allowed us to estimate the prevalence of bushmeat provided by household members themselves, which can be interpreted as a proxy for hunting.

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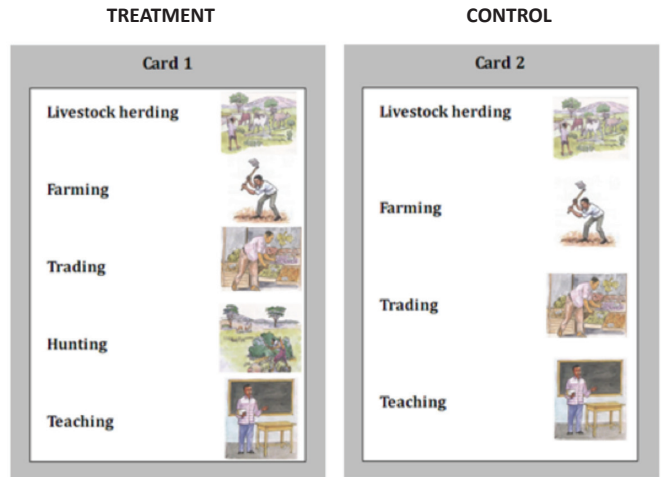


Fig. 2: Sample “Unmatched-Count-Technique” card shown to survey respondents in different sub-samples

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