

Eliciting probabilistic expectations: Collaborations between psychologists and economists

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We describe two collaborations in which psychologists and economists provided essential support on foundational projects in major research programs. One project involved eliciting adolescents' expectations regarding significant future life events affecting their psychological and economic development. The second project involved eliciting consumers' expectations regarding inflation, a potentially vital input to their investment, saving, and purchasing decisions. In each project, we sought questions with the precision needed for economic modeling and the simplicity needed for lay respondents. We identify four conditions that, we believe, promoted our ability to sustain these transdisciplinary collaborations and coproduce the research: (i) having a shared research goal, which neither discipline could achieve on its own; (ii) finding common ground in shared methodology, which met each discipline's essential evidentiary conditions, but without insisting on its culturally acquired tastes; (iii) sharing the effort throughout, with common language and sense of ownership; and (iv) gaining mutual benefit from both the research process and its products.

interdisciplinary research | expectations | subjective probabilities | adolescents | inflation

One day in 1995, one of us (B.F.) was standing in line at the National Academy of Sciences Refectory, along with Charles Manski, an economist then at the University of Wisconsin (now at Northwestern University). Manski was complaining about restrictions imposed on the survey questions that he was designing for the 1997 National Longitudinal Study of Youth. To understand adolescents' willingness to invest in their human capital, he wanted to ask them to assess their percent chance of experiencing significant life events that could affect their earning power, such as getting a job as a young adult with or without a high school diploma. However, members of the survey design team maintained that young people could not answer probability questions. They therefore insisted on "easier" response scales, asking adolescents to provide verbal quantifiers, such as "unlikely" and "very likely," instead of percentages. Manski worried that these verbal quantifiers were ambiguous and would elicit responses that could not be compared with actual statistics, making it impossible to tell how well adolescents understood their circumstances. Indeed, Manski saw the constraint as triggering a vicious circle. If he had to ask needlessly vague questions, then the

predictive value of his models would be undermined, making it harder to keep his questions on the survey in the competition for space with other scientists.

Overview

The ensuing conversation was the start of a collaboration between economists and psychologists coproducing research that neither discipline could have done on its own. After summarizing the scientific foundations for eliciting lay expectations, we describe two major collaborative projects, one focused on adolescents' expectations for significant life events and the other on consumers' expectations for inflation. We conclude by describing the conditions that we believe have made this transdisciplinary research possible.

Eliciting Expectations

Existing psychological research confirmed some of Manski's concerns. Psychologists had found that the same verbal quantifier can mean different numbers to different people in a given context and different things to the same person in different contexts (1–4). Thus, a "likely" snowfall in December might imply a higher numerical probability than a "likely"

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Table 1. NLSY97 expectation questions, and comparisons with actual outcomes

What is the percent chance that you will	<i>n</i>	Correlation (γ) with observed future outcome	Mean probability (1997), %	Observed future outcome rate, %
Be a student in a regular school a year from now?	3,160	0.64***	92.5	79.6
Have received a high school diploma by the time you turn 20?	3,077	0.60***	94.5	92.0
If you are in school a year from now, [...] be working for pay more than 20 h a week?	2,492	0.29***	57.7	27.2
If you are not in school a year from now, [...] be working for pay more than 20 h a week?	610	0.31***	80.5	43.9
Become pregnant within 1 y from now? (female)	844	0.37***	8.9	20.1
Get someone pregnant within the next year? (male)	1,553	0.35***	9.4	7.9
Become the parent of a baby sometime between now and when you turn 20? (female)	1,368	0.38***	16.0	25.7
Become the parent of a baby sometime between now and when you turn 20? (male)	1,356	0.27***	19.1	13.4
Be arrested, whether rightly or wrongly, at least once in the next year?	3,141	0.41***	10.3	8.2
Serve time in jail or prison between now and when you turn 20?	3,300	0.39***	5.4	2.8
Die from any cause (crime, illness, accident, and so on) in the next year?	3,165	n.s.	18.7	0.1
Die from any cause (crime, illness, accident, and so on) between now and when you turn 20?	3,169	n.s.	20.3	0.5

n.s., not significant. Reprinted from ref. 25, with permission from Elsevier.
 *** $P < 0.001$.

snowfall in October (5). Some studies have found that responses to verbal scales predict behaviors and outcomes as well as responses to numerical probability scales (6–8). However, as Manski had observed, verbal scales do not allow responses (which are often provided on 1–7 Likert scales) to be compared with observed probabilities (which vary between 0–100%). As a result, verbal scales could not reveal whether adolescents over- or underestimated their chances of completing school, finding employment, being arrested, or experiencing other significant life events.

In addition to confirming Manski’s concerns about verbal quantifiers, studies also had confirmed his hopes about numerical ones. Economists had been asking subjective probability questions on national surveys since the early 1990s, with the University of Michigan’s Health and Retirement Study (HRS) being especially influential because of its extensive set of expectation questions, large national sample, and longitudinal design (9). Among its questions, the HRS asked adult respondents to judge the probability that they would live until the age of 75 or 85 y. On average, respondents’ probability judgments were close to statistical life table estimates for respondents’ age groups and were correlated with their self-reports of known risk factors, such as smoking, drinking, and health conditions (10). Moreover, because the HRS tracked these adults over time, economists were able to find that individuals’ judgments of their probability of survival predicted their actual chances of being alive at those target ages (11). Economists also found that HRS respondents who gave lower probabilities of survival were more likely to retire and claim Social Security benefits early (12, 13). In a Dutch household survey that incorporated HRS expectations questions, judged probabilities of stock market gains predicted respondents’ stock market participation (9, 14).

The few studies conducted by psychologists examining adolescents’ use of numerical probabilities had found similarly

orderly judgments that revealed, among other things, a heightened perception of risk among adolescents as compared with adults (15, 16). One longitudinal study had found that adolescents updated their seemingly high risk judgments after initiating risk behaviors (e.g., drinking, driving), revealing their increased awareness of the relatively lower actual risks that those behaviors entailed (17). Although adolescents’ numerical probability judgments sometimes reflected overestimation, the problems seemed to lie with adolescents’ underlying beliefs (reflecting, for example, how they interpreted adults’ warnings) and not with their ability to express or update those beliefs (18).

Adolescents’ Expectations of Significant Life Events

Seeing Manski’s plight and an opportunity to extend our own research on adolescent decision making (19, 20), we offered to collaborate. We started by drafting probability questions that captured, in everyday language, the concepts critical to economic models of human capital formation. One of us (W.B.d.B.) then conducted cognitive interviews with adolescents, asking them to think out loud while answering these questions in their own words. The questions were revised, and the process was repeated until our wording was simple enough to be understood by adolescents while remaining precise enough to be useful to economists. The associated instructions, used in the 1997 National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY97), appear in the box below. A subset of the probability questions and responses appear in Table 1. The instructions were longer than we would have preferred, to include details that mattered to Manski and his colleagues. For example, the instructions included explicit encouragement to use nonround numbers, even though respondents rarely did so, except for values close to 0% or 100% (21, 22). It was easier to compromise on the length of the instructions, because the in-person administration of NLSY97 would reduce respondents’ cognitive load.

Instructions for the Expectation Module of NLSY97

Each of the next set of questions will ask you for your best guess at the chance that something will happen in the future. You can think of the PERCENT CHANCE that some event will occur as the number of CHANCES OUT OF 100 that the event will take place.

If you think that something is impossible, consider it as having a 0% chance. If you think the event is possible but unlikely, you might say there is a 3% chance or a 15% chance. If you think the chance is pretty even, you can say there is a 46% chance or perhaps a 52% chance. If you think the event is likely, but not certain, you might say there is a 78% chance or a 94% chance. If you think it is certain to happen, give it a 100% chance. Just to make sure that you are comfortable with the scale, I'd like you to do a few practice questions, and explain your answer to me.

What do you think is the percent chance that you will get the flu sometime in the next year?

What do you think is the percent chance that you will eat pizza sometime in the next year?

Source: <https://www.nlsinfo.org/sites/nlsinfo.org/files/attachments/121128/nlsy97r1yexp.html>.

Our collaboration offered a unique opportunity to collect longitudinal survey data for a large representative sample of 15- and 16-y-olds ($n \sim 3,500$) in the United States. The economists on the team offered expertise in the variables critical to human capital formation (e.g., expected return on investment in education) and in the precise terms needed for economic models (e.g., clearly specifying the event and its time of occurrence). The psychologists on the team offered expertise in behavioral decision research and adolescent development [e.g., suggesting heuristics that can both support judgments and lead them astray (23, 24)] and in formulating questions that respondents could understand (e.g., using accessible wording). NLSY97 offered us all a remarkable set of measures of participants' behavior and psychological characteristics, tracked over time, allowing analyses of how respondents' expectations related to their self-reported beliefs and behaviors, for hypotheses posed by both economics and psychology (25–27). Those other measures were created independently by experts in those respective fields. They also reflected different theoretical frames of reference and used diverse response modes, thereby reducing the risk of shared method variance when evaluating the expectation questions (28). In analyses of responses from the initial NLSY97 data, we found sensible relationships between expectations and concurrently reported beliefs and behaviors (thereby reflecting construct validity; ref. 29): For example, adolescents who reported currently being enrolled in school gave higher probabilities for getting a high school diploma by age 20 y (26). In analyses of responses to subsequent waves, we found that reported expectations also predicted future outcomes. For example, adolescents who, in 1997, gave higher probabilities for experiencing various events in the next year or by age 20 y (e.g., "become pregnant," "be arrested, whether rightly or wrongly") were more likely to report having experienced those events by those dates (25). As seen in Table 1, correlations (γ) between expectations and outcomes ranged from 0.27 to 0.64.

For some events (e.g., receiving a high school diploma by age 20 y, being arrested in the next year), teens' mean probability judgment was close to the observed rate, indicating that, on average, they had accurate expectations. For other events, however, expectations were less accurate. For example, adolescents overestimated the probability of being a student a year later and of having a job if not in school. For the psychologists on the team, these results helped to elaborate the processes involved in theories regarding optimistic bias (30), overconfidence (31), and the illusion of control (32). For example, teens' judgment of their probability of being in school a year hence was a poorer predictor than was their current enrollment status, suggesting that some teens underestimate the importance of staying in school for being able to complete their education (33). Nonetheless, their probability judgments predicted future enrollment better than did behavioral measures (e.g., self-reported absenteeism and arrests, or estimates of the percentage of their peers who planned to go to college), suggesting that their expectations summarized knowledge about their lives that was not captured by the behavior self-reports. For the economists on the team, psychological theories provided a framework for interpreting suboptimal judgments and decisions at a time when alternatives to rational actor models were less common in their discipline than they are today.

The NLSY97 responses did have one notable anomaly: adolescents' seemingly pessimistic responses to questions asking for the probability of dying in the next year and by age 20 y (25–27). As seen in the bottom two rows of Table 1, teens greatly overestimated their probability of dying: Although their statistical probability of dying was vanishingly small (<0.1% annually), their mean judgments were 18% for dying in the next year and 20% for dying by age 20 y. Moreover, responses were similar for the two mortality questions, even though one involved a span of 1 y and the other a span of about 4 y (NLSY97 respondents were, on average, 16 y old at the time of the survey). When respondents gave different probabilities for the two questions, the value was larger for the longer period in only two-thirds of the cases. People may overestimate low probability risks when relying on imperfect knowledge, which makes judgments regressive (34). However, these findings also echoed other evidence that adolescents perceive themselves as especially vulnerable, contradicting the common notion that they have a unique sense of invulnerability (15, 16). Using responses to other NLSY97 modules, we found that teens who gave higher probabilities of dying also reported greater concern about their health and safety and more risk behaviors (27). Responses to later waves of NLSY97 revealed that teens who gave higher probabilities of dying also reported more risk behaviors in young adulthood (35). A similar correlation was observed on the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, although with a scale using verbal quantifiers that did not allow responses to be compared to statistical estimates (36, 37).

Cognitive interviews, in which we asked participants to think aloud while answering expectation questions, added to our emerging recognition of another psychological aspect of how people think about uncertain events: Sometimes, participants said "50–50," seemingly to express not knowing what to say rather than a numerical probability (38, 39). For example, in one interview, an adolescent responded to a question about the probability of getting HIV from having sex by saying, "It could; it could not. So, I guess it's up in the air ... a 50–50 chance" (38). Another said, "I don't know, 50–50, cause there's always that possibility that something like the condom would break or something" (38).

A review of existing studies on probabilistic expectations revealed a "50 blip" in many response distributions (40, 41). If these 50% responses are intended to mean "I don't know," then treating them as numerical values will distort summary statistics. Indeed, there was a substantial 50 blip in responses to the NLSY97 mortality questions, resulting in means (of about 20%) that were much higher than the corresponding medians (of about 10%). In experimental studies pursuing the topic, we found that 50% was more common with open-ended response modes than with visual linear scales (38) and with questions about the probability of a person experiencing an event than with questions about the percent of people experiencing it (39). Working with economist Katherine Carman on the Dutch Longitudinal Internet Panel for the Social Sciences, we found that 50% responses are more likely than other probability responses to be explained as "don't know" (42).

One notable project building on the NLSY97 collaboration, led by economist Adeline Delavande, has shown the usefulness of eliciting adolescents' expectations about the effectiveness and side effects of birth control methods in interpreting their choices (43). Delavande and colleagues have also extended research on eliciting expectations in diverse populations. For example, in a sample of 3,000 adults recruited in Malawi (44), she found that respondents' expectations related to HIV/AIDS were generally coherent, in the sense of following probability axioms and being consistent with their self-reports of related risk behaviors. Despite this internal consistency in their beliefs, respondents reported expectations of dying that were much higher than their actual mortality risk (44). In contrast to these projects, in which psychologists and economists found common ground, there is continuing controversy over how well smokers understand the attendant risks, an area in which researchers from the two disciplines continue to disagree about methods (45, 46).

The NLSY97 expectations module has had modest popularity among economists and other researchers (47–50). However, despite these questions' construct validity, the seeming overestimation of dying young was troubling for researchers who believed in rational actor models or who were familiar with the much more realistic mortality estimates that adult respondents had provided on other surveys (9, 10). The mortality estimates also were invoked by critics who wanted to discredit the probability response mode altogether, ignoring the evidence of its usefulness. Their complaints were forceful enough to get the expectation module dropped from the next few waves of NLSY97 data collection. Eventually, however, the expectation questions from Wave 1 of NLSY97 proved useful enough that the module was reinstated, although without the mortality questions.

Consumers' Expectations of Inflation

About 10 y later, Charles Manski called us about a very different expectation question: A team of economic researchers, coordinated by Wilbert van der Klaauw and his colleagues at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, was studying consumers' expectations for inflation. For economists and central bankers, these expectations play a central role in predicting financial decisions with implications for the overall economy, for example, about savings, durable goods purchases, and wage negotiations (51). Central banks use surveys to elicit consumers' inflation expectations, which then, along with market-based measures and surveys of professional forecasters, inform monetary policy, (52, 53). For three decades, the primary survey of inflation expectations in the United States had been the

Reuters/Michigan Survey of Consumers (54). Each month, that survey asked a representative sample of respondents, "During the next 12 months, do you think prices in general will go up, down, or stay where they are now?" Those who answered "up" or "down" were then asked, "By about what percent do you expect prices to go (up/down) on the average, during the next 12 months?" The question was repeated for a longer time horizon, eliciting inflation expectations for the next 5–10 y. It was believed that the wording "prices in general" had been chosen by those who drafted the original survey because it seemed easier for respondents than "inflation," while having the same meaning for economists.

Respondents' mean reported expectations for "prices in general over the next 12 mo" had tracked statistical estimates of inflation (55–58). However, the distributions of these responses revealed large variation in individuals' estimates, with roughly half in the 0–5% range and the remainder including much higher values (54, 56, 59, 60). Because the Consumer Price Index in the United States has not been above 5% since the 1990, such inflation expectations may seem excessive (54, 56). Higher estimates were more common among respondents with lower income and educational attainment (56). One possible economic explanation is that the consumption patterns of individuals in these groups expose them to higher inflation rates, thereby increasing their inflation expectations (61). However, economic analyses revealed much less variation in the inflation rates experienced by different demographic sectors (e.g., from 0.2 to 0.4%, in 1995–2005) than in their inflation expectations (62, 63). One possible psychological explanation is that respondents interpret the expectation question differently.

Social, behavioral, and decision scientists have long studied how people interpret questions (e.g., ref. 64). They have found that even seemingly simple terms, such as "rain," can mean different things to different people (65). In collaboration with the economists convened by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, we applied these methods to examine how respondents interpret questions about expectations for "prices in general." Our first step involved 30 open-ended interviews about financial expectations and decisions, which asked participants to think out loud while answering the standard question about "prices in general." We found that many did not interpret "prices in general" as referring to overall inflation, as reflected in economic estimates (e.g., the Consumer Price Index) and as had been assumed when survey responses were used in economic models. Rather, some people reported thinking about prices of specific goods, such as gas or food, often focusing on ones that had increased at rates greatly exceeding overall inflation. However, when asked about their expectations for "inflation," interviewees were more likely to think about overall economic patterns. Contrary to the intuition that the term "inflation" might be unfamiliar, all participants said that they had heard of it and gave reasonable definitions (see also refs. 66 and 67).

The next step of the project examined the generalizability of the interview findings, using RAND's American Life Panel, a nationally representative sample that regularly completes online surveys. Our first study asked participants how well the question about "prices in general" matched alternative interpretations taken from the interviews. We found that respondents who interpreted "prices in general" as referring to their personal price experiences gave higher expectations for changes in "prices in general" over the next year (59). Our second study found that the personal price experiences most likely to come to

construct and predictive validity, with the precision needed to inform economic models and evaluate the accuracy of lay beliefs (compared with statistical estimates). In the second example, "inflation" proved to be a meaningful term, evoking consumers' thinking about the economy as a whole, whereas ostensibly simpler terms invoking prices directed respondents to salient, unrepresentative changes.

Both research programs involved transdisciplinary efforts. We believe that the conditions allowing that collaboration included:

- i) Shared research goal. Both projects were motivated by a common goal: designing survey questions that would improve understanding of individuals' expectations relevant to their personal and financial welfare. All team members agreed in advance that those questions should have the specificity required by economic models and the validity required by psychological methods, recognizing the essential contribution of both disciplines.
- ii) Shared methodology. Where economic and psychological approaches diverged, we sought common ground. We set aside differences in research tastes without theoretical or practical implications. We subjected differences that did matter to empirical test (e.g., think-aloud interviews to examine respondents' question interpretations, experimental comparisons of alternative approaches, correlations evaluating construct or predictive validity).
- iii) Shared effort. On both projects, the teams collaborated throughout the process, taking care that one another's concerns were properly understood and adequately addressed, and that agreement was reached on how to proceed. That continuous consultation and coproduction allowed the teams to develop shared language and ownership. In fact, our efforts were shared to the extent that, in writing this paper, we often found it difficult to disentangle precisely who had made which specific contributions.
- iv) Shared benefits. Both projects afforded benefits that participants could not have found working solely within their discipline. For the economists, those benefits included psychologists' insight into question construction and validation, along with evidence supporting their desire for better survey methods. For the psychologists, those benefits included access to unique data sets and to economists' formalization of how people might form expectations and use them in

decisions regarding human capital formation and personal finance.[†]

Achieving these conditions involved a shared conviction that the research required more than just reading relevant publications in one another's literature. Rather, it required continuing consultation with colleagues in the other discipline who knew the context within which those publications were written. It also involved acknowledging when the literature contains competing views and evidence, open issues, and traditions based on taste rather than evidence.

We have found these conditions met in other teams of psychologists and economists willing to make similar personal commitments to understanding personal and social decisions (42, 79). We also have been fortunate enough to find them in collaborations with medical experts, on understanding and informing patients' health decisions (80); with engineers, in analyzing risks (81, 82) and promoting sustainable consumer decisions (83, 84); with environmental scientists, in understanding public response to extreme weather and climate change (85, 86); and with anthropologists and political scientists in studying security issues (87, 88). We believe that such collaborations are essential for addressing applied problems and are healthy for the sciences involved, by testing their theories in complex environments and revealing phenomena that stimulate new research. We have also found them personally and intellectually gratifying.

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[†]We believe that these collaborations also met the criteria for creative research environments identified by Nils-Eric Sahlin (90): (i) generosity, in sharing knowledge and experience; (ii) community; (iii) scientific qualifications; (iv) intellectual diversity; (v) trust and tolerance for ideas breaking with traditions; (vi) equality, among participants of varying seniority; (vii) curiosity; (viii) freedom of spirit; and (ix) intimacy of scale, allowing individuals to stay in touch.

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