

Review

Questions and deception: How to ask better questions and elicit the truth

Eric M. VanEpps^{1,a} and Einav Hart^{2,a}**Abstract**

Questions are important tools for uncovering information, but to avoid deception, question askers must be strategic in what and how they ask—and consider the social implications of their questions. Askers should consider that in addition to soliciting information, questions also signal information about expected answers, askers' own knowledge, and the parties' relationship. We review literature on deception, conversations, and impression management to discuss signals embedded in question phrasing, and how these signals affect the truthfulness of respondents' disclosures. Askers can increase truthful disclosure by remaining neutral about the desirability of possible responses, conveying knowledge of the topic, and signaling trust. We identify how asking better questions requires being more cognizant of the informational and relational signals that questions send.

Addresses¹ University of Utah, USA² George Mason University, USACorresponding author: VanEpps, Eric M (eric.vanepps@eccles.utah.edu)^a Joint first authorship based on equal contribution.**Current Opinion in Psychology** 2022, 47:101383This review comes from a themed issue on **Honesty and Deception (2023)**Edited by **Maurice E. Schweitzer** and **Emma Levine**For complete overview about the section, refer [Honesty and Deception \(2023\)](#)

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Introduction: ask and you shall receive?

How do we navigate interactions such as interviews, social gatherings, negotiations, and work meetings to get information? One immediate answer is “ask questions.” After all, most questions are designed to solicit information from recipients. Both children and adults ask questions to enhance their knowledge and understanding [1–3] and solicit feedback in hopes of receiving helpful, diagnostic information [4–7].

Ideally, information-seeking questions would produce answers that are true, relevant, and enhance the asker's knowledge [8]. However, the reality is not so simple.

In many cases, recipients may not be forthcoming with truthful information: They may lie, deflect, dodge, reveal partial truths, or refuse to answer at all [9–11]. Because many questions involve sensitive information or occur in competitive contexts, respondents often have their guard up to protect or conceal information. Seemingly the most straightforward approach of asking direct questions (e.g., “Is there any problem with this used car?”) may increase the likelihood that respondents will provide an answer related to the desired topic, but may also increase the likelihood of lies of commission (i.e., false information) [10]. Thus, people may need to approach the act of question-asking strategically: Gather information before and during the conversation to understand what questions they need to ask, and phrase their questions in specific ways to increase the likelihood of receiving relevant, truthful responses. Put differently, to get the truth we should not merely ask questions; we need to ask the *right* questions.

The use of questions to elicit information is difficult because questions also implicitly convey information about the askers themselves. That is, similar to other types of communication behaviors, questions provide signals (intentionally or inadvertently) about the topic in question, the askers themselves, and their relationship with the respondent. Broadly, questions may reveal information about an asker's preferences or expectations [12,13]. Thus, questions could lead respondents to give answers that correspond with what they think the asker expects or wants to hear, rather than with the actual truth [14,15]. In addition, would-be askers might worry about sending the “wrong” signal (e.g., be concerned that an innocent question might seem judgmental or, conversely, as flirting). We assert that a fuller consideration of the signaling aspect of questions can lead to a better understanding of why deception and misinformation can persist, and how people can ask more and better questions (see [Figure 1](#)).

In the following sections, we review literature on deception, conversations, and impression management to discuss: 1) the signals that questions can implicitly convey about the answer or the asker, and the

consequences of those signals for deception and disclosure; and 2) how concerns about relational signals influence the questions people ask. In the last section, we offer extensions based on these insights, previewing potential directions for future research and practical implications for question askers.

Questions offer signals about the asker

Desired or acceptable answers. How an asker phrases their questions can convey information about the correct or expected answer. This includes questions that point to a specific desired direction of response (e.g., “how happy were you?” vs. “how sad were you?”) and pedagogical or leading questions, which give the recipient “hints” about the correct answer (e.g., “how fast were the cars going when they smashed into each other?”) [16,17], both of which may obscure a respondent’s true feelings or beliefs. In the doctor’s office, for instance, rapid-fire questions may seem to suggest that short answers are preferred, which may prevent patients from revealing relevant information [16,18,19]. Phrasings that call for simple yes or no answers (“Are you experiencing pain today?”) or suggest the absence of a problem (“You are not in any pain today, right?”) tend to lead to less detailed, relevant, or interesting information than more open-ended yet pointed questions (“What kind of pain, if any, are you experiencing today?”).

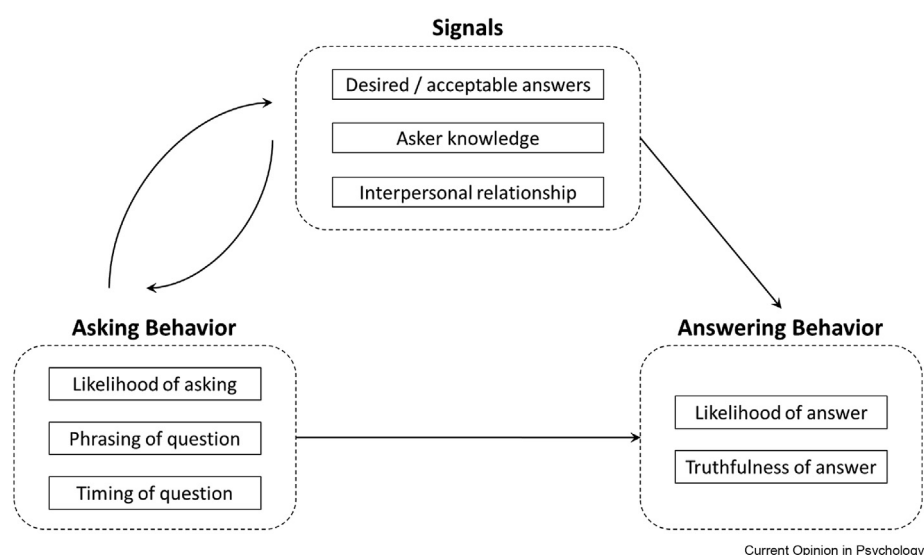
Relatedly, asking questions about specific issues or behaviors may indicate the prevalence of these topics or their social acceptability [20–22], which are important to consider given respondents’ tendency toward the

social desirability bias—selectively reporting information to paint oneself in a positive light [21,23,24]. In the example above, a yes/no question may suggest that the symptom of pain is less common, and questions which communicate that an issue or topic is uncommon or undesirable—for example, if they imply that pain is a sign of weakness—may lead to lies of omission (e.g., not disclosing pain) or to lies of commission (e.g., explicitly claiming that one feels fine) [25–27]. Conversely, a question that normalizes the experience of pain by asking about the kind of pain experienced may lead patients to disclose more truthfully, and in greater detail.

Across topics and contexts, askers should consider phrasing questions to either normalize or remain neutral about undesirable information (e.g., risky behaviors such as substance abuse, or cheating on taxes). One approach is to couch target questions among other questions where individuals are disclosing information, suggesting that each of the discussed behaviors are categorically similar in their normativity [22,25]. Another approach is to not ask directly about the behavior of the individual respondent, but to ask about similar others (e.g., “How much pain do you think this same condition would cause people like you?”) [24,28,29]; such questions diminish respondents’ concern about making negative impressions on the asker.

Askers’ knowledge. Questions can also communicate askers’ own knowledge or competence—or lack thereof [30–32]. Given the importance of making and maintaining positive impressions, and the important role that communication plays in impression management

Figure 1



Conceptual Model of Question Asking, Social Signals, and Deception. *Note.* Asking questions solicits information. Questions also affect what information is solicited through the signals they provide about expected or desired answers, askers’ own knowledge, and the parties’ relationship. Knowledge of (or beliefs about) these signals can influence whether and what questions people ask in the first place. Asking better questions requires being cognizant of the informational and relational signals that questions send.

[33–35], this potential negative signal may lead many people to avoid asking questions, particularly when they believe their competence is in doubt [4,6,36,37]. In such cases, askers may first seek information from alternative sources, such as friends or the internet, to be able to ask more direct questions that instead convey higher competence to the recipient. For instance, when one can identify a likely problem, questions that include a “negative assumption” about that topic—wherein the asker suggests that a problem exists and asks about the magnitude of the problem (e.g., “how soon will I need to replace this car’s tires?”)—signal knowledge and competence. This signal, in turn, convinces respondents who might otherwise lie that the asker is knowledgeable about the topic at hand, and increases the likelihood of disclosure about the problem [12].

Questions and interpersonal relationships

Within a conversation, people not only aim to obtain information, but often also have interpersonal goals, such as building positive relationships with their conversational counterparts and making good impressions [7,13,38–40]. These conversational goals of information gathering and relationship management often conflict with one another, particularly in the case of questions: Questions can both signal and influence the asker’s relationship with the respondent, as well as affect the likelihood of disclosure versus deception. One special concern about using questions to gather information is that questioning others may seem to indicate a negative relationship [41–43]. For instance, the “negative assumption” questions described in the previous section can effectively elicit information and signal competence, but could harm the ongoing relationship with the respondent by communicating the asker’s distrust. Furthermore, the nature of a pre-existing relationship influences what questions people are likely to ask going forward—if conversations have previously consisted of small talk or work-related topics, more probing questions can feel particularly intrusive. That is, we suggest there is a bi-directional association between the questions people ask and the social relationships they have, such that questions asked may influence relational perceptions, and interpersonal concerns and norms may influence the questions people are likely to ask (see Figure 1).

Askers often weigh their desire to obtain truthful information and curtail deception against social considerations such as creating discomfort for the recipient [13,44,45]. For example, sensitive or unexpected questions are more likely to derail a liar’s prepared narratives and force them to discuss information they had not previously considered [46–48]; accordingly, these questions curtail deception. Yet, because such questions may be more uncomfortable to ask and are perceived as having the potential to damage relationships and cause discomfort [13], people may avoid asking them.

Notably, we postulate that some of these concerns about the relational consequences of question-asking may be overblown, or even completely wrong when questions improve the quality of a relationship. People often underestimate the extent to which others like them [49,50], and overestimate the harm that questions can cause to their impressions and relationships [13]. Though askers should be aware of the signals sent by their questions, relational concerns may be exaggerated as a reason to avoid asking relevant questions. Moreover, some types of questions (e.g., questions following up on a previous statement) can be used to signal a positive relationship, express interest, and enhance liking in both interpersonal and organizational (e.g., leadership) contexts [38,45,51,52]. For example, though an advisor might worry about putting pressure on an advisee by asking for updates on work-in-progress, these questions in fact signal that the advisor cares about the advisee, suggests interest in the advisee’s work, and sets the stage for information exchange that can improve the work itself. In other words, rather than hurting relationships, questions can be used to foster relationships. We propose that people often have a miscalibrated mental model of the relational impact of questions, leading them to ask too few questions; when managed carefully, question-asking can help achieve informational goals at smaller-than-expected relational costs—and perhaps even with relational benefits.

Directions for future research

Deception often persists because people are reluctant to ask questions, partly due to impression management or relational concerns. Because asking questions also implies the asker is interested in a given topic [12,13,38,53], questions are likely to influence the subsequent direction of the conversation, and may set the stage for the asker to receive a similar question [38,53]. If people want to avoid being asked about a given topic themselves and can foresee how a related question may lead to reciprocal asking, they may avoid asking questions. As an extension of such concerns, we expect that people will avoid asking relevant questions when worried about their own behavior or knowledge in that domain. We postulate that by deciding not to ask questions, people often *opt into* being deceived, allowing lies of omission or misperceptions to persist. Future research could explore different drivers of the reluctance to ask questions, as well as investigate the consequences of a reluctance to ask.

We reviewed several goals that askers may have in addition to obtaining information, such as the desire to protect a relationship or make a good impression. We propose that questions can both signal how the asker views the relationship and influence the relationship moving forward. Though questions asked with the intention of learning information may be more

acceptable than askers typically perceive—even when they involve uncomfortable topics (e.g., political issues, another's salary)—we posit that questions which signal distrustful intentions can have the opposite effect. When questions suggest the asker doesn't believe or trust the respondent, these signals of distrust could license respondents to engage in deception in the current conversation and/or in following interactions. After all, if they are not going to be believed or respected regardless, why would they respond truthfully? Moreover, in some cases askers may already know the truth and want to “test” the respondent by asking “trap questions” (e.g., an employee who already knows but still asks their coworker, “did you submit the report yesterday?”)—with the intention of catching the respondent in a lie and indirectly eliciting information about the respondent's character. Future research is needed to understand when questions signal distrust and how asking such questions might in fact increase deception.

Conclusions

Questions can be powerful tools for learning the truth. Yet, the social act of question asking is complicated, especially in situations that may involve deception. We reviewed research on social dynamics showing the wide range of signals that questions can convey, how these signals influence both askers' reluctance to ask and respondents' willingness to answer questions, and how different types of questions may lead people to be more comfortable answering truthfully. By asking questions that avoid suggesting a preferred answer, we diminish concerns about social desirability and instead can obtain more accurate information; by asking questions that signal our own knowledge, we reduce the likelihood of a respondent's lie of omission; and by asking questions that signal interest (rather than distrust), we can avoid negative relational impacts. As we ask questions and seek to learn the truth, we should be sensitive to how and why the signals we send may influence the answers we receive, the impressions we make, and our future interactions. In so doing, we do not just ask questions and hope for the best, we ask *better* questions and expect the best.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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