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Approaching stereotypes and myths in social surveys: the example of British Social Attitudes

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Britain's leading independent social research institute



Overview of presentation

Two key questions

- What is the role of BSA in exploring myths and stereotypes?
- How does BSA question design address this problem?

One possible setback

- Why could BSA be seen to be re-enforcing myths and stereotypes?

What is BSA's role in exploring myths and stereotypes?

General role

- an attitudes survey designed to measure people's social, moral and political attitudes
- designed to track attitudinal change over time

Specific roles

- discovering myths - when a state of affairs does/does not exist and (certain) people believe this is not the case
- exploring stereotypes - where there is a perception that certain groups have particular characteristics

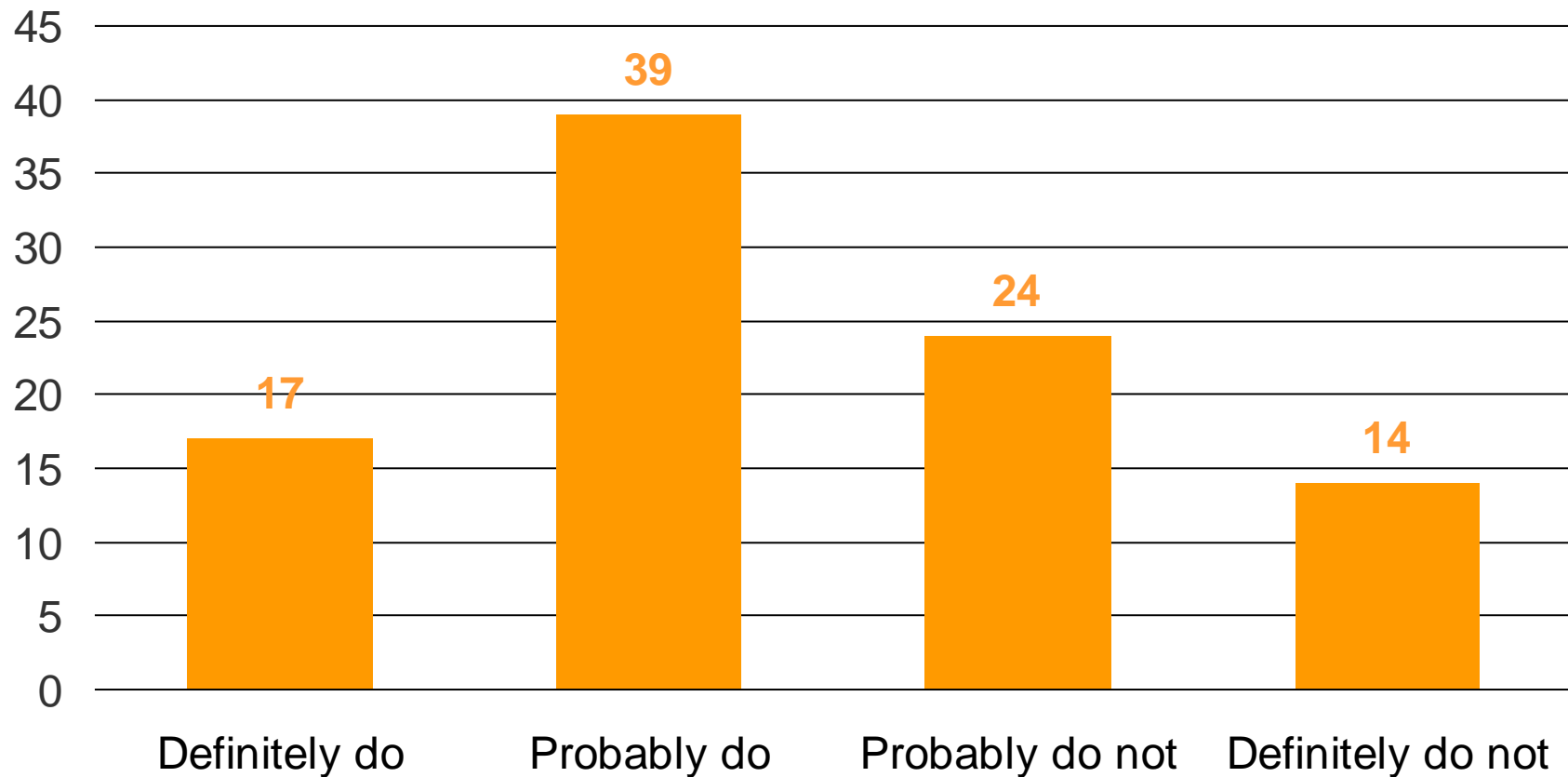
Approach to exploring myths

- Questions directly asking respondents about beliefs

“Common Law Marriage” Myth

As far as you know, do unmarried couples who live together for some time have a ‘common law marriage’ which gives them the same legal rights as married couples?

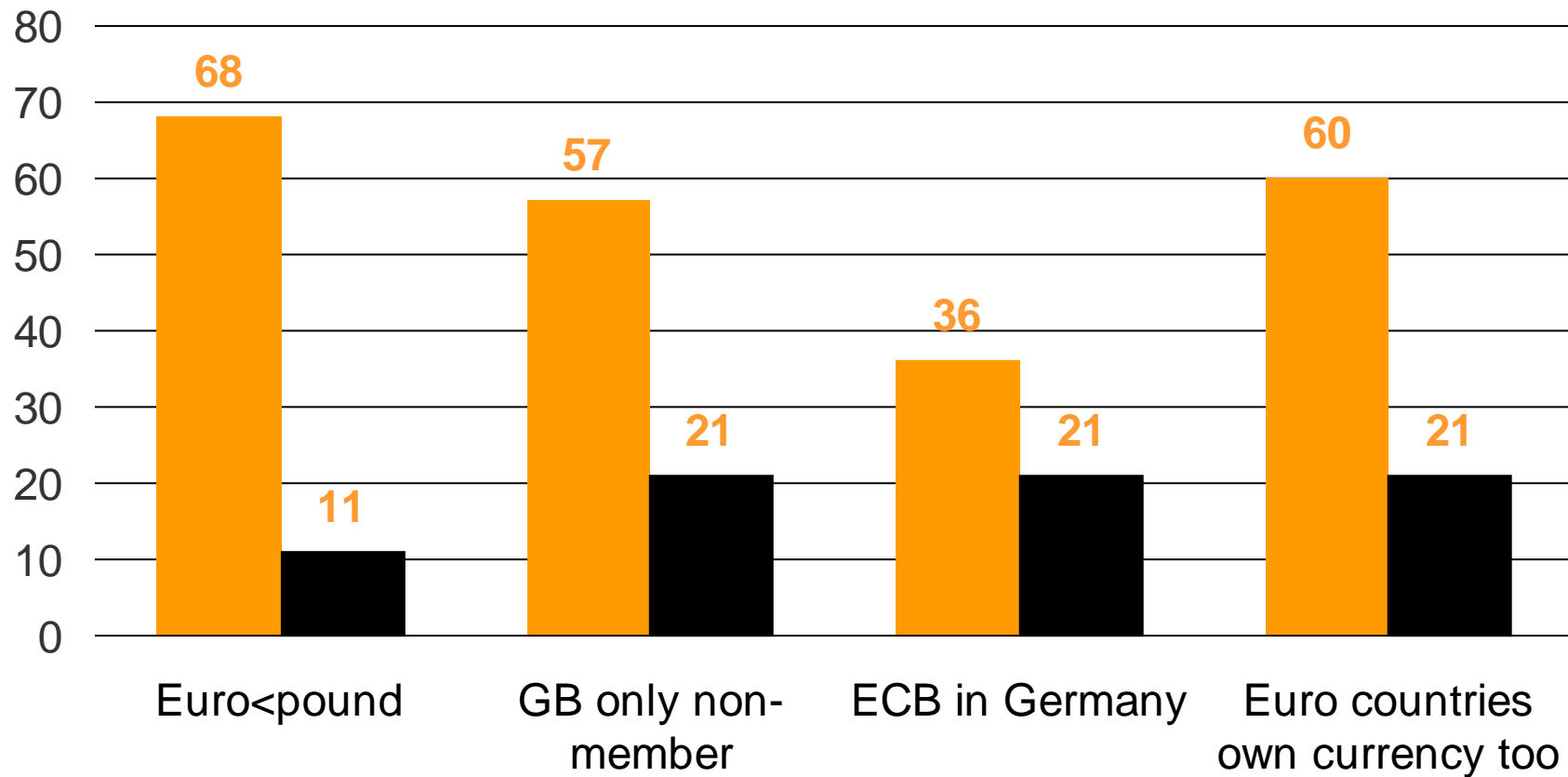
Common law marriage myth, 2000



Approach to exploring myths

- Often in the form of ‘quizzes’, eg EU, 2002
- For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you think it is true or false. If you don’t know, please just say so and we’ll go on to the next one. So - true, false or don’t know.
- One Euro is worth less than one British pound (T)
- Britain is the only member of the EU that is not a member of the single European currency (F)
- The headquarters of the European Central Bank are in Germany (T)
- The countries that have introduced the Euro are still using their own currencies as well (F)

Knowledge of EU





Why could BSA be seen to be re-enforcing stereotypes?

Issues common to survey research

- necessitates simplification of complex issues, influences and decision-making processes
- attitudes considered in a vacuum
- encourages selection of answers on basis of one or two factors
- questions presented in the language or context of myths and stereotypes
- consequently, analysis framed around myths and stereotypes



How does BSA question design address this problem?

Types of question design

- agree-disagree statements
- scales
- forced-choice questions
- normalising potential stereotypes
- scenarios/vignettes
- assessing whether views are informed or not



Agree-disagree statements

Approach

- measures direction and strength of opinion
- multiple questions on a topic
- best questions are strongly worded
- best to have balanced batteries of questions

When to use approach

- to explore nuances in attitudes
- can combine to create scales

Agree-disagree statements - example (1)

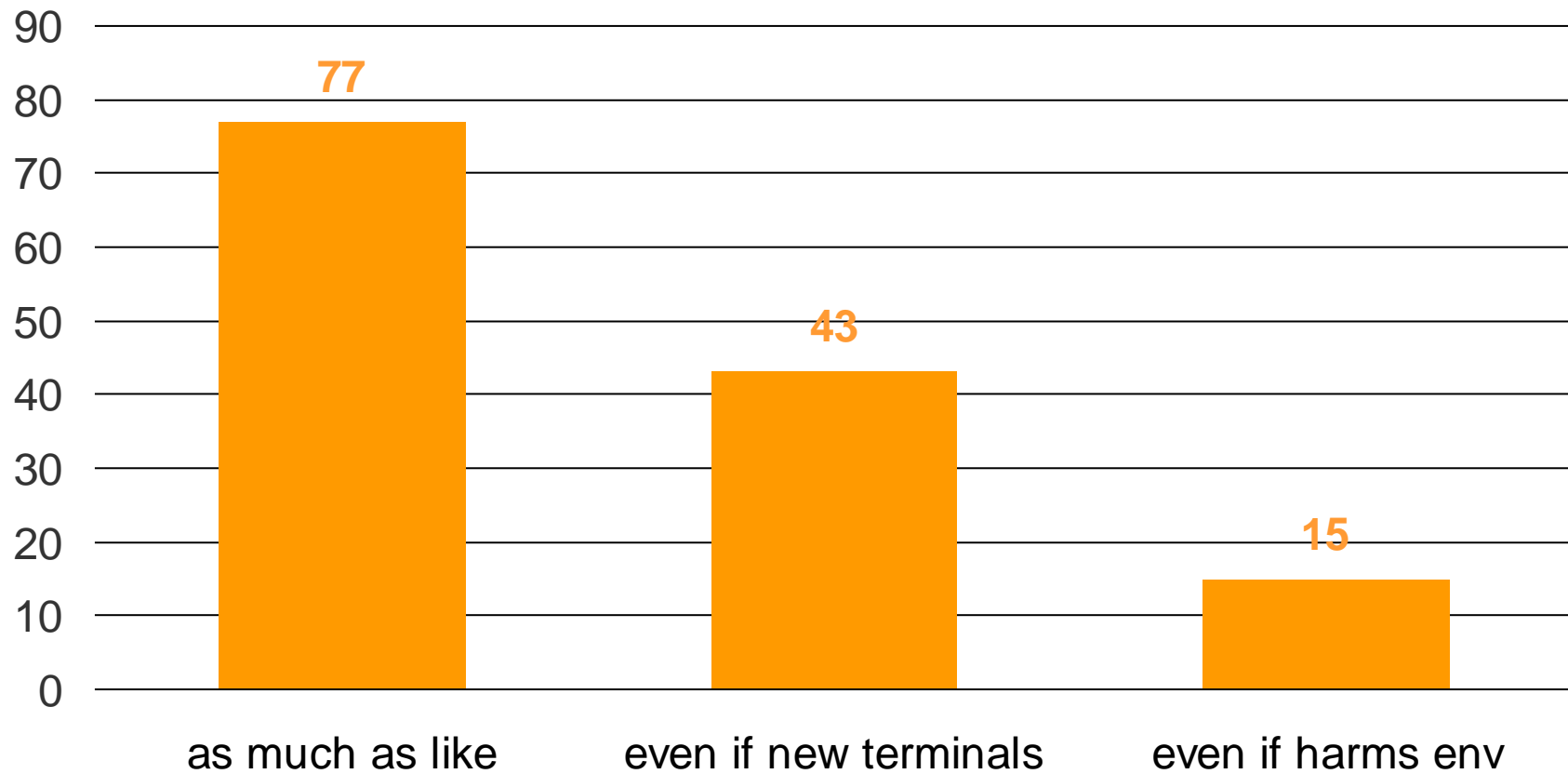
Now some questions about air travel. Please tick one box for each statement to show how much you agree or disagree.

People should be able to travel by plane as much as they like

People should be able to travel by plane as much as they like, even if new terminals or runways are needed to meet the demand

People should be able to travel by plane as much as they like, even if this harms the environment

Attitudes to air travel - % agree, (2004)



Agree-disagree statements - example (2)

There are different opinions about immigrants from other countries living in Britain. (By 'immigrants' we mean people who come to settle in Britain)

Immigrants increase crime rates (-)

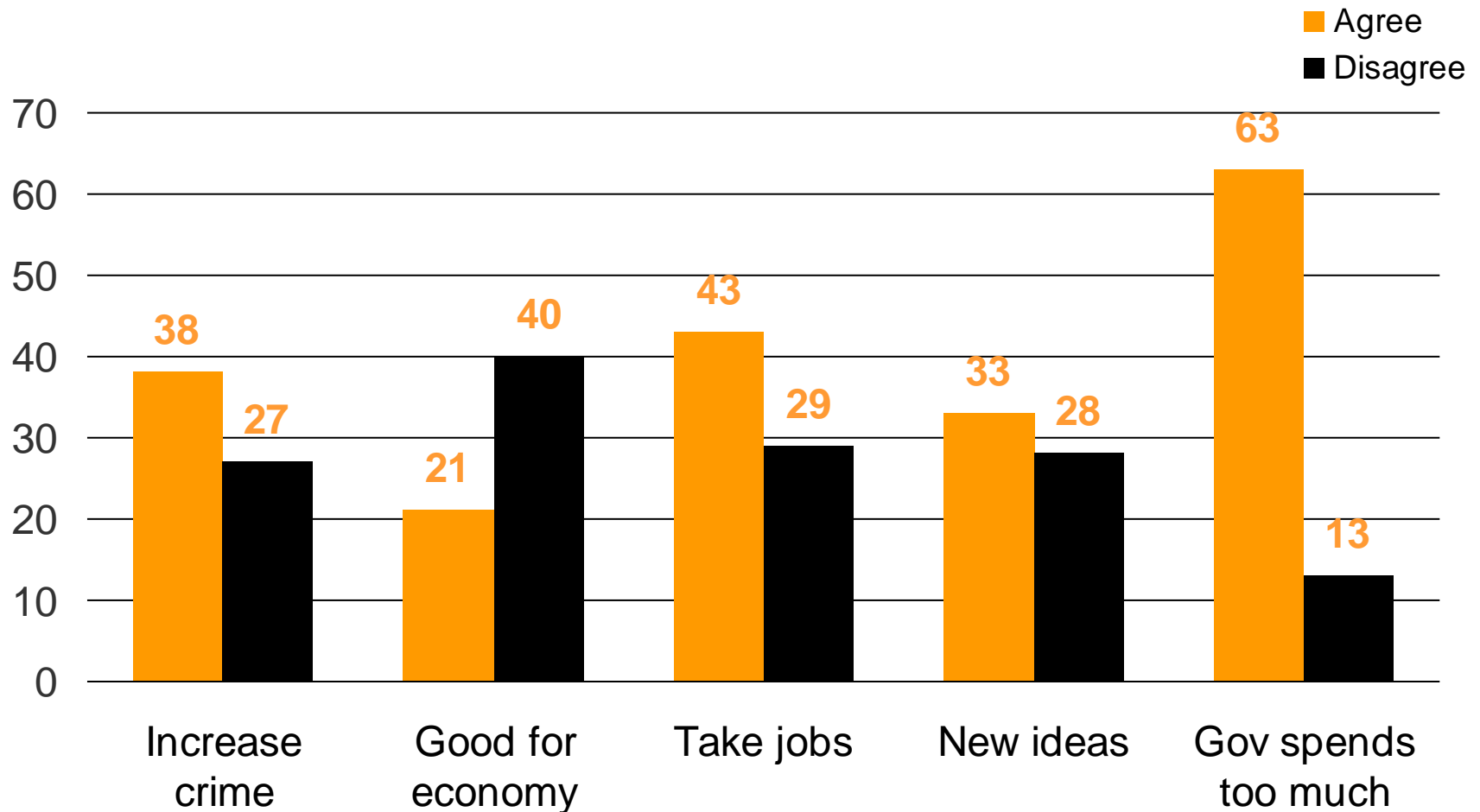
Immigrants are generally good for Britain's economy (+)

Immigrants take jobs away from people who were born in Britain (-)

Immigrants improve British society by bringing in new ideas and cultures (+)

Government spends too much money assisting immigrants (-)

Attitudes to immigrants, (2003)



Scales

Approach

- summarises responses to provide general attitudinal measure
- often of some underlying dimension that cannot be measured directly
- classic BSA scales - libertarian-authoritarian scale, left-right scale, welfarism scale

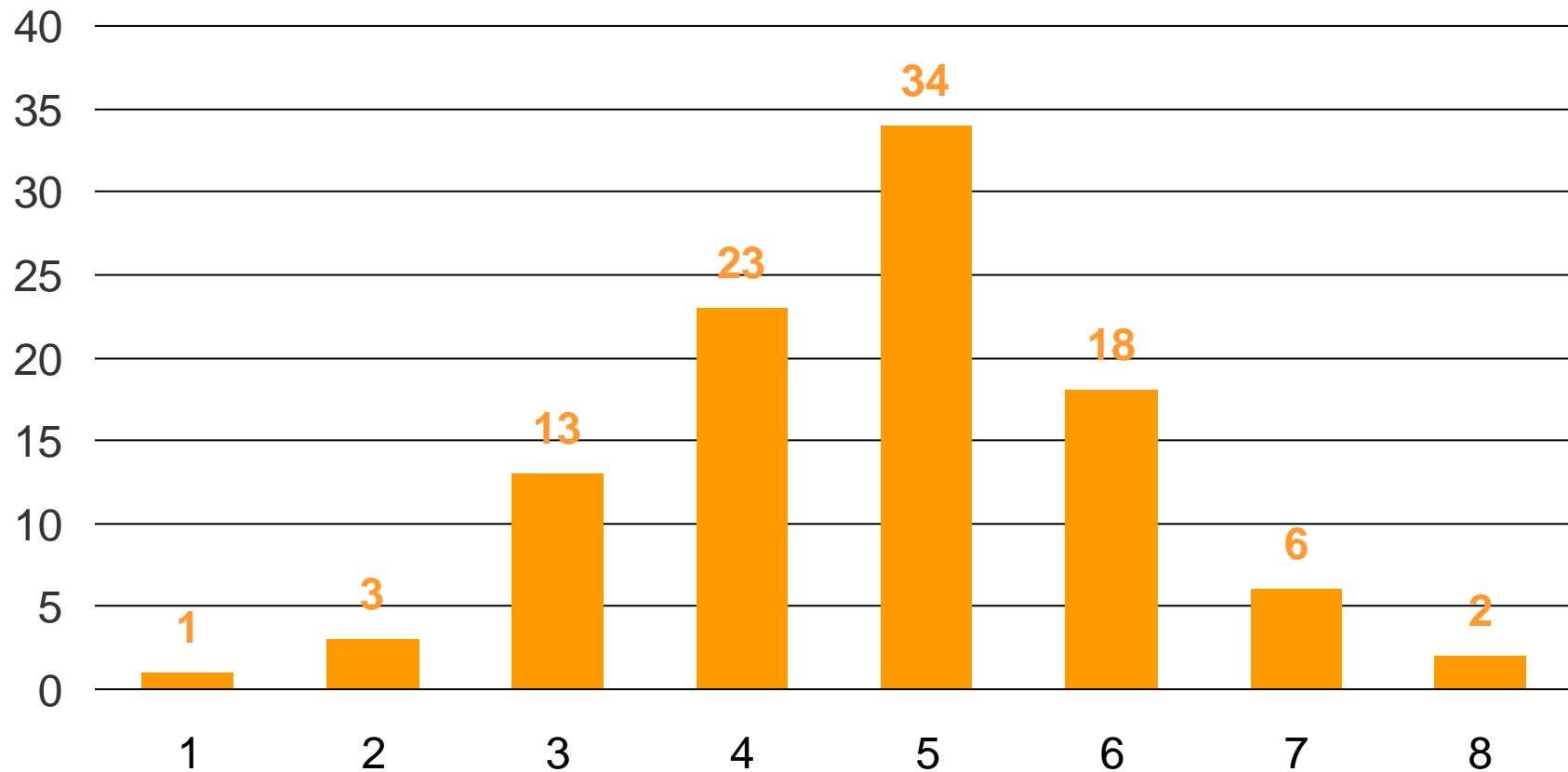
When to use approach?

- can be used to see how far specific attitudes are grounded in general belief system

Scales - welfarism scale

- The welfare state encourages people to stop helping each other (-)
- The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes (+)
- Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted to (-)
- Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help (-)
- Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another (-)
- If welfare benefits weren't so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet (-)
- Cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives (+)
- The creation of the welfare state is one of Britain's proudest achievements (+)

Welfarism (2004)



Scales - example

Teenage mums (2001)

- “All too often Britain’s welfare system rewards teenage mothers” (agree/disagree)
- “Teenage girls who have children often do so to jump the housing queue (agree/disagree)

How scale allows us to explore stereotype

- examine if attitudes link to score on welfarism scale, to see if part of a general belief system (or relates to stereotypical view of teenage mothers)

Forced-choice questions

Approach

- present respondents with specific options and ask them to select the most appropriate
- not leading or one-sided

When to use approach

- when we believe some respondents may not have considered all aspects of an issue
- when there are directly opposing positions to be taken
- when there are fairly limited positions to take



Forced choice question - example (1)

Do you think the number of immigrants to Britain
nowadays should be...

Increased a lot

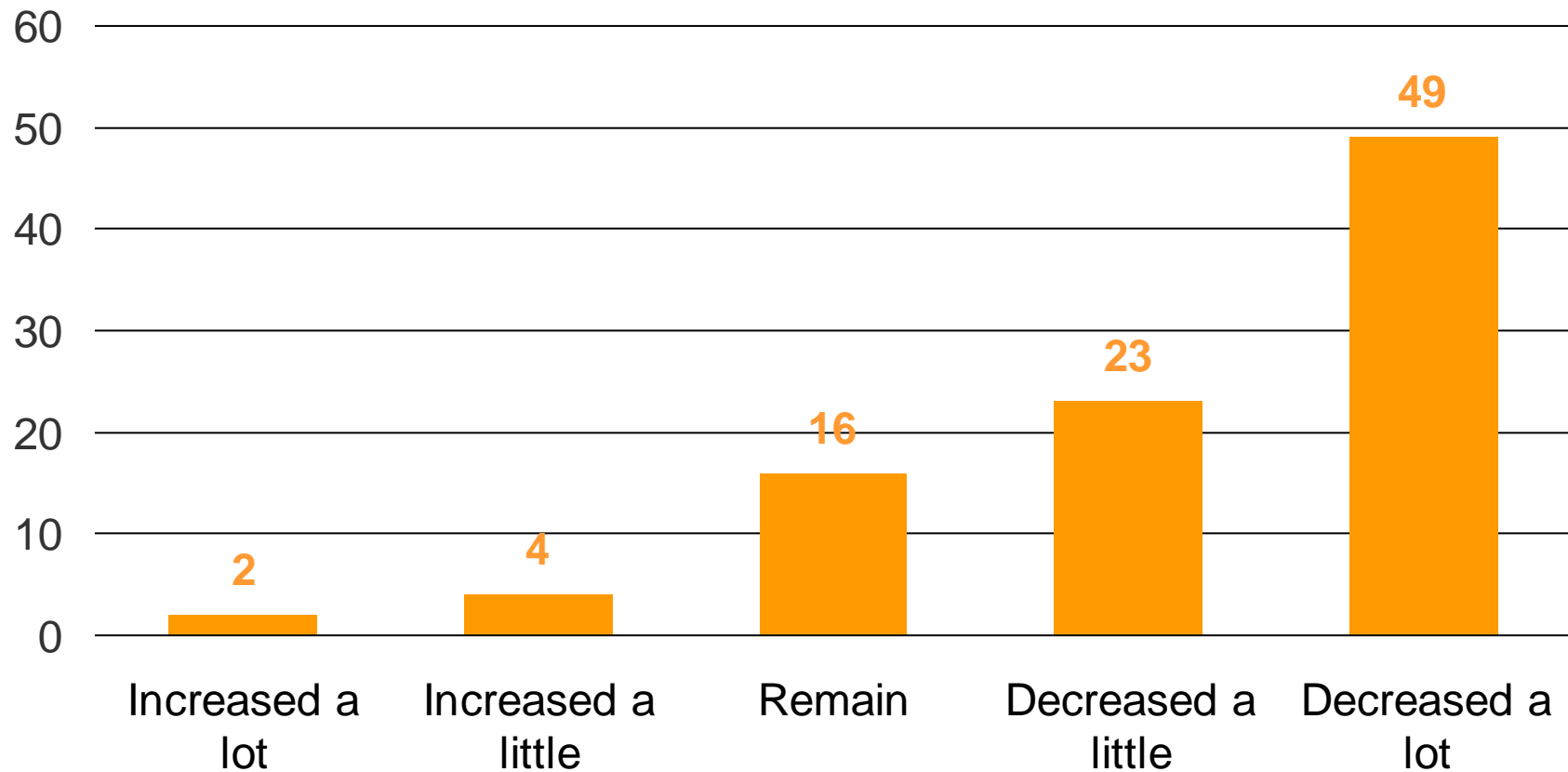
Increased a little

Remain the same as it is

Reduced a little

Reduced a lot

Attitudes to level of immigration, (2003)



Forced choice questions - example (2)

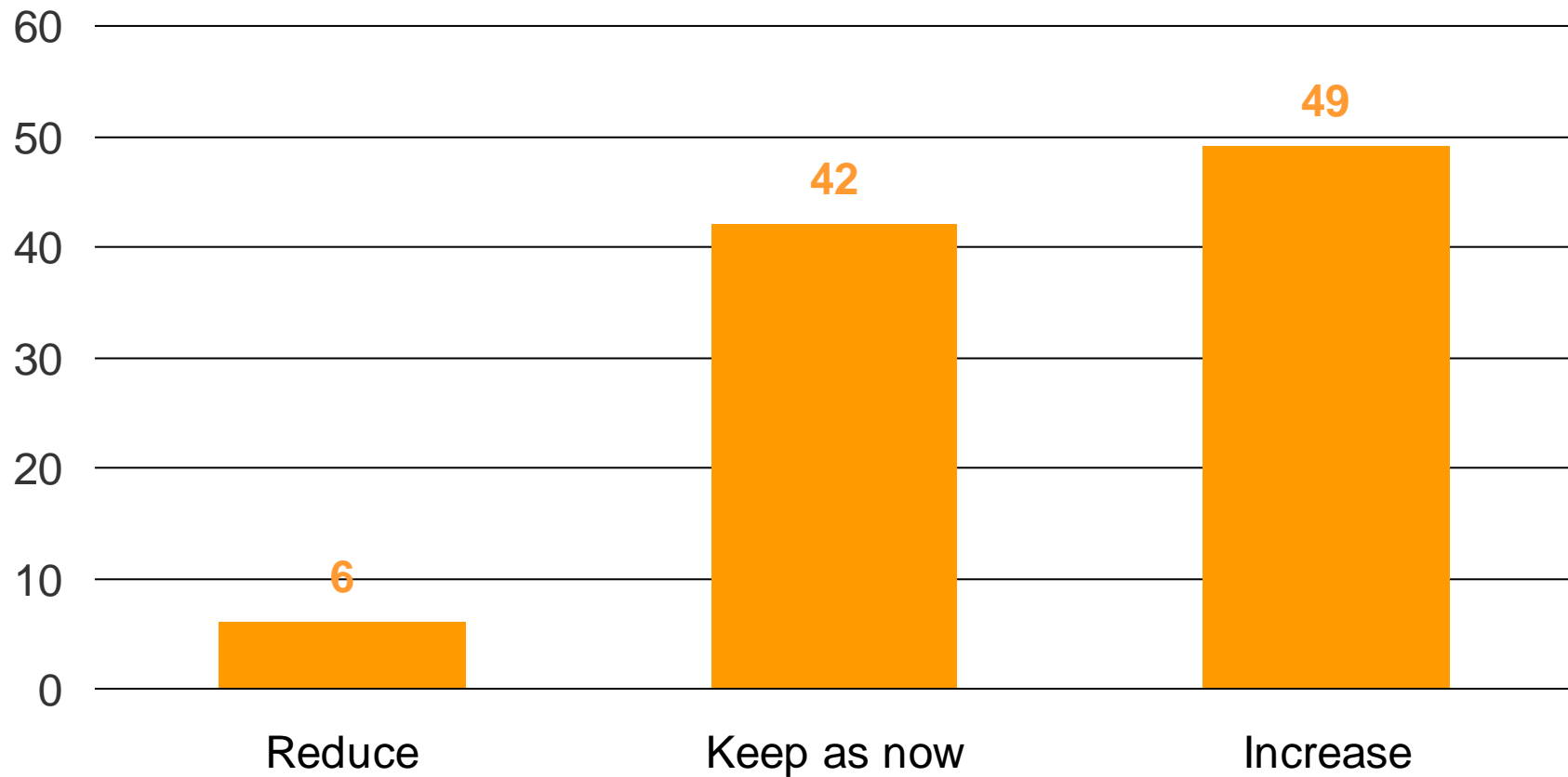
Suppose the government had to choose between the three options on this card. Which do you think it should choose?

Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits

Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now

Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits

Tax and spend, (2004)



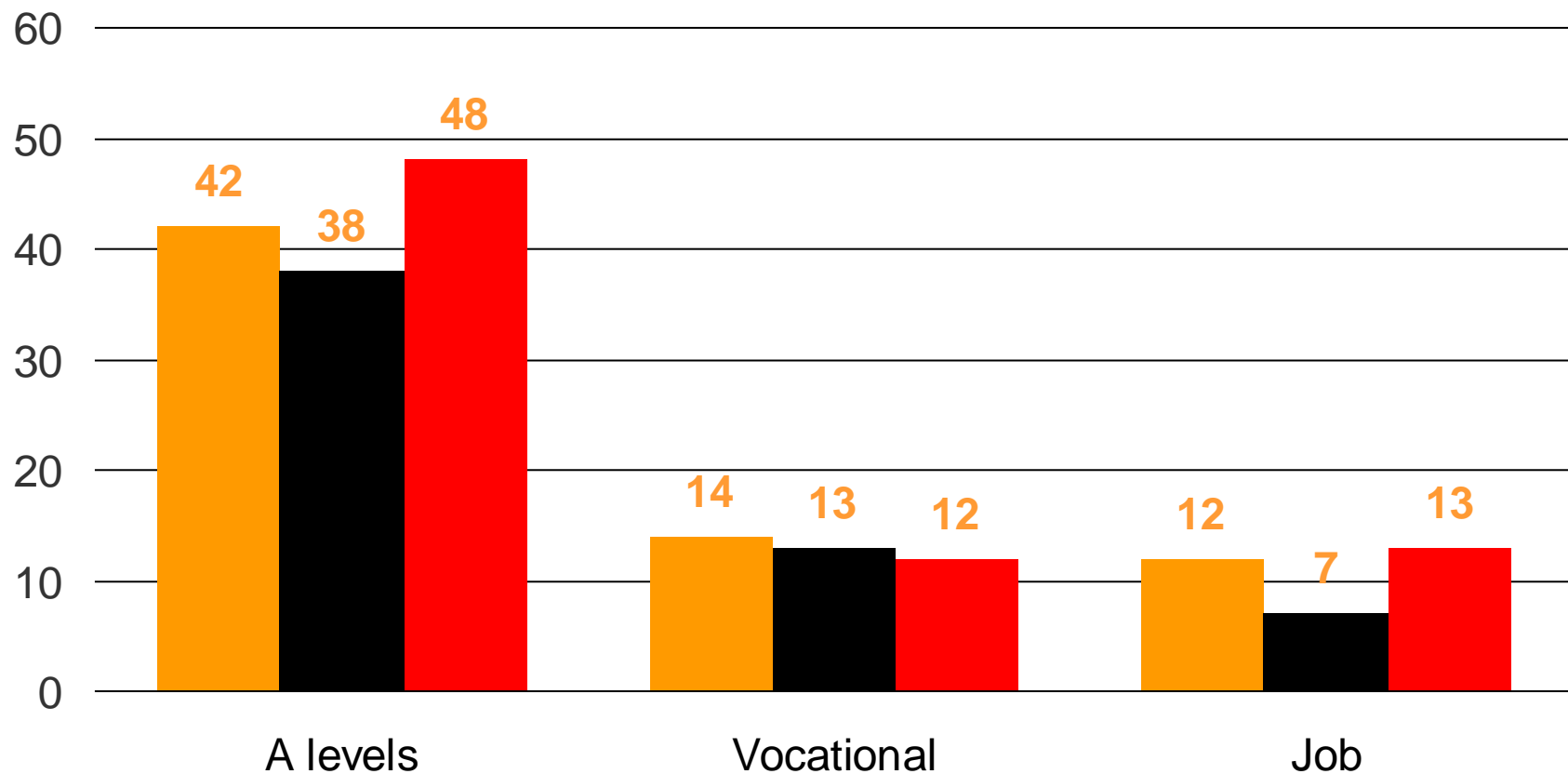
Forced choice questions - example (3)

Suppose you were advising a 16 year old about their future. Would you say they should...

...stay on in full-time education to get their A levels
or study full-time to get vocational, rather than academic
qualifications

or leave school and get training through a job?

Advice to 16 year old (2004)



Normalising potential stereotypes

A variety of approaches

- suggesting every view is valid and population's views are mixed
- asking about a related issue first
- asking what other people think first
- asking about what **does** happen before asking about what **should** happen

When to use approach

- when sensitive attitudes are being explored



Suggesting every view is valid and population's views are mixed

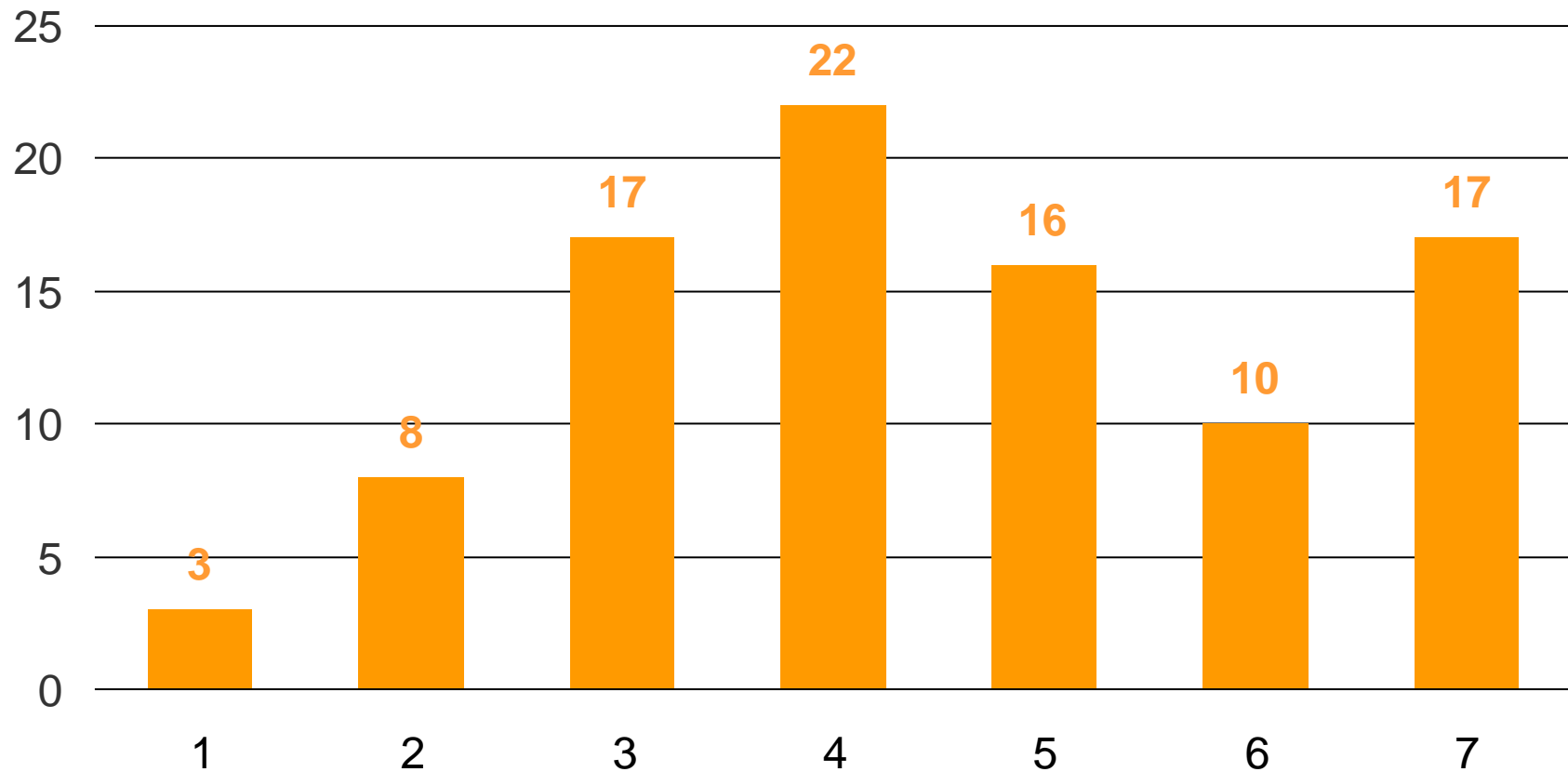
Some people think that Muslims living in Britain are really committed to Britain, these people would put themselves in box 1.

Other people feel that Muslims in Britain could never be really committed to Britain and would put themselves in box 7.

Other people have views somewhere in between in boxes 2 to 6.

Which number comes closest to your own views about whether Muslims in Britain are really committed to Britain or not?

Muslims living in Britain (2003)





Asking about related topic first

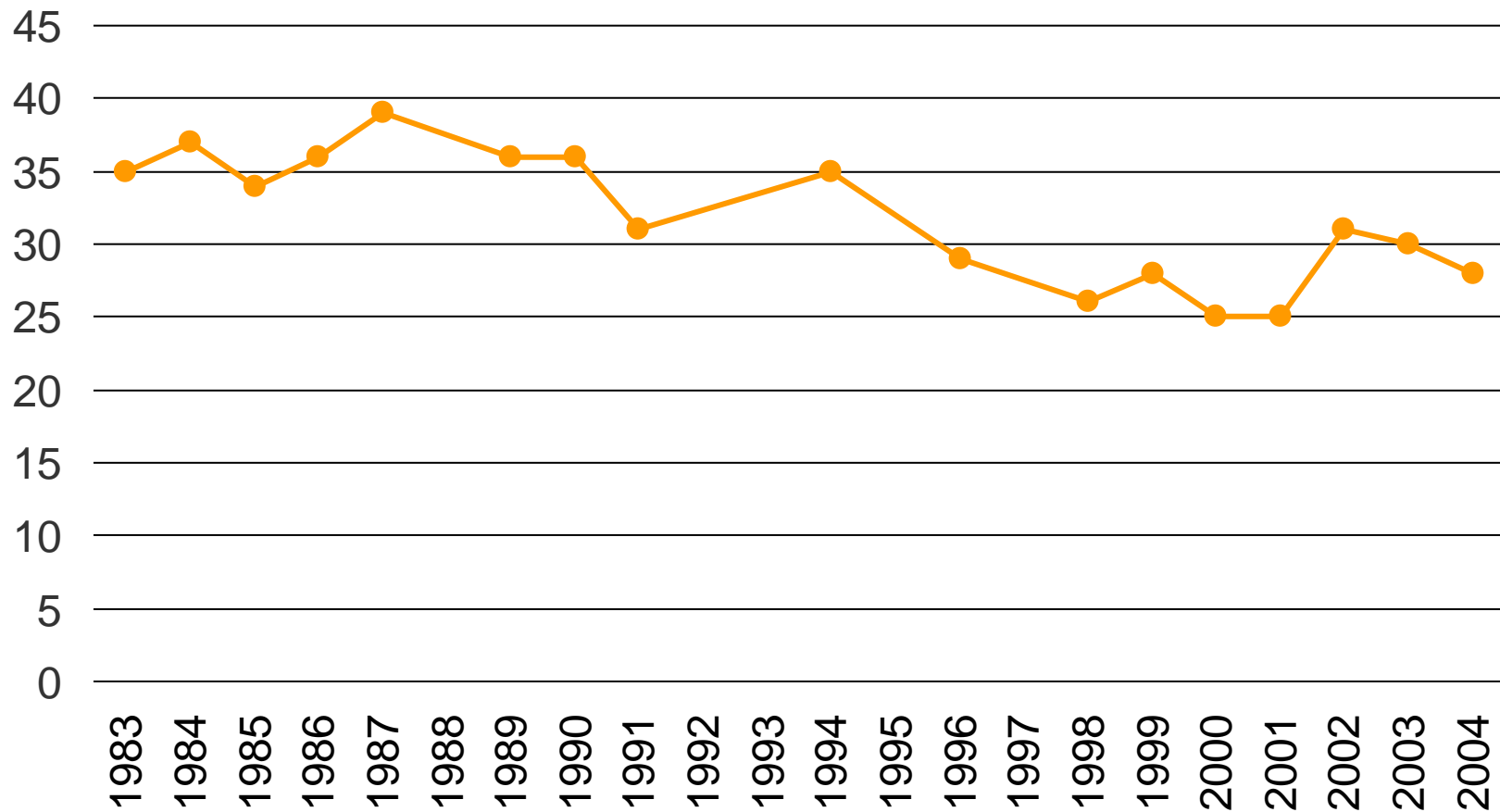
Do you think there is generally more racial prejudice in Britain now than there was 5 years ago, less or about the same amount?

Do you think there will be more, less or about the same amount of racial prejudice in 5 years time compared with now?

How would you describe yourself...as very prejudiced against people of other races, a little prejudiced, or not prejudiced at all?



% 'very' / 'a little' prejudiced



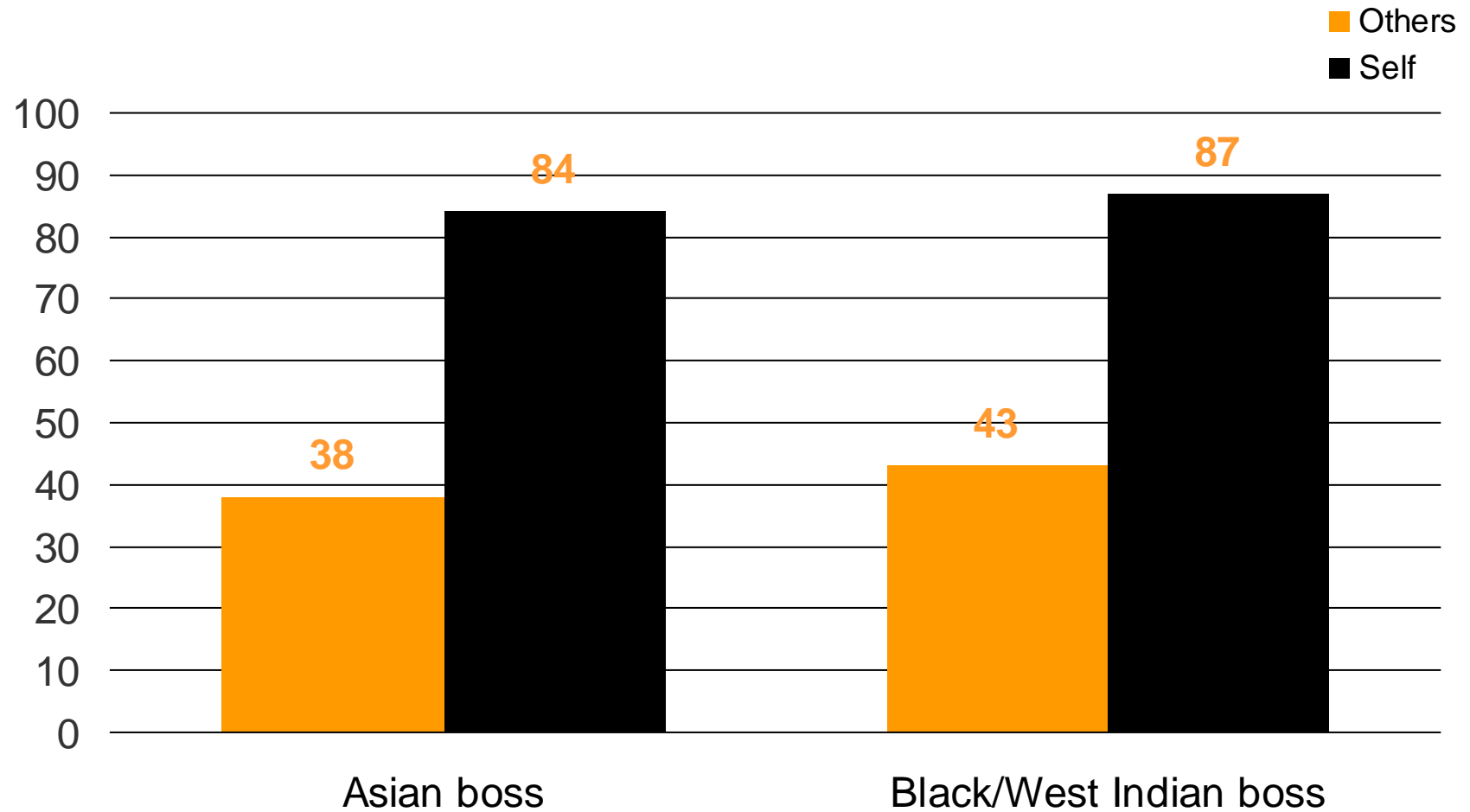


Asking about other people first

Do you think most people in Britain would mind or not mind if a suitably qualified person of Asian origin were appointed as their boss?

And you personally, would you mind or not mind?

% 'not mind' if (1996)





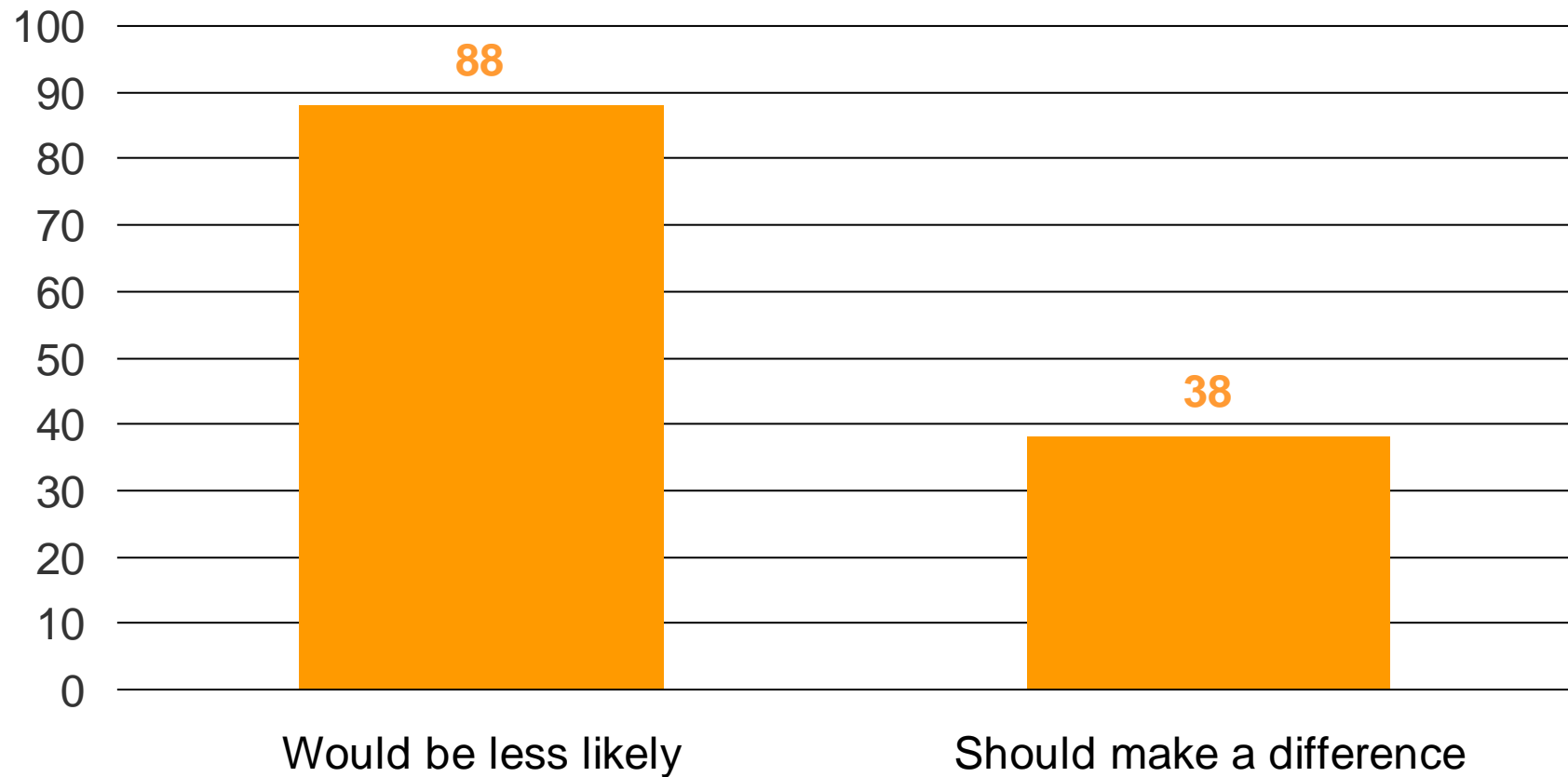
Asking about what does happen then what should happen

Suppose an employee applied for a promotion. He has had repeated periods off work because of depression but this has been under control for a year or so through medication. Do you think he would be...

...just as likely as anyone else to be promoted,
slightly less likely to be promoted
or much less likely to be promoted?

And what do you think should happen? Should his medical history make a difference or not?

Depression and promotion (2003)



Scenarios

Approach

- places attitudes in a real-life context rather than the abstract
- varies factors / characteristics to see if this alters attitudes

When to use approach

- when aim is to explore impact of different factors in determining a belief
- to explore how pervasive a particular attitude is

Scenarios – example (1)

How do you think you would feel if a person who uses a wheelchair were to move in next door?

Thinking now of a different situation, how do you think you would feel if a person who uses a wheelchair was appointed as your boss?



Scenarios – example (2)

Think of an unemployed single mother with a young child. Their only income comes from state benefits.

Would you say that they...

...have more than enough to live on,

have enough to live on,

are hard up,

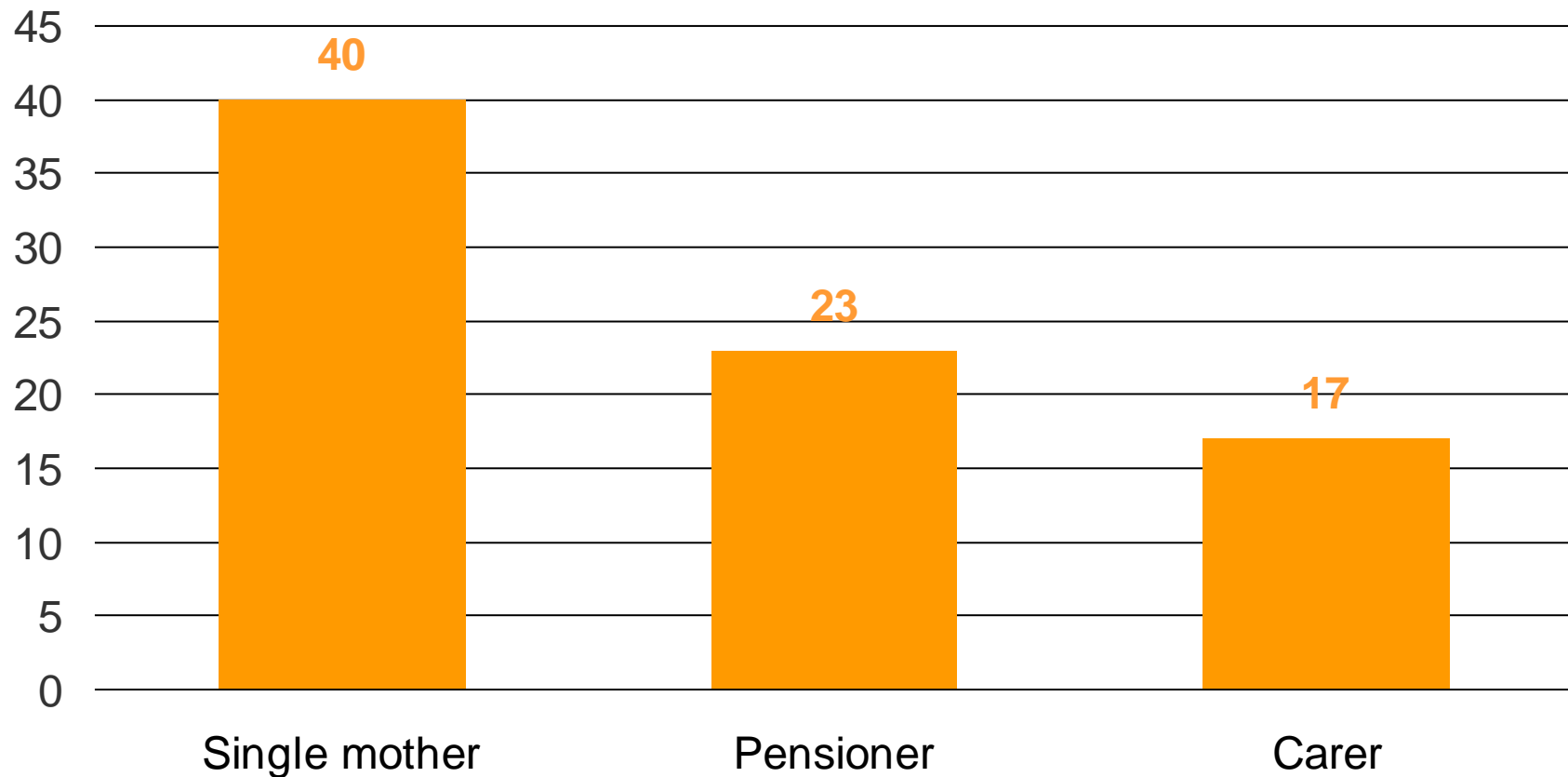
or are really poor?

Scenarios – example (2)

Now think about a pensioner living alone. Her only income comes from the state pension and other benefits specially for pensioners. Would you say that she...

And what about a woman who can't work because she has to look after her husband or partner who has a long-term illness. Their only income comes from state benefits. Would you say that they...

% 'more than enough'/'enough', (2004)





Scenarios - example (3)

Now thinking again about that unemployed single mother with a young child. After rent, their income is £130 a week. Would you say that they...
...have more than enough to live on,
have enough to live on,
are hard up,
or are really poor?



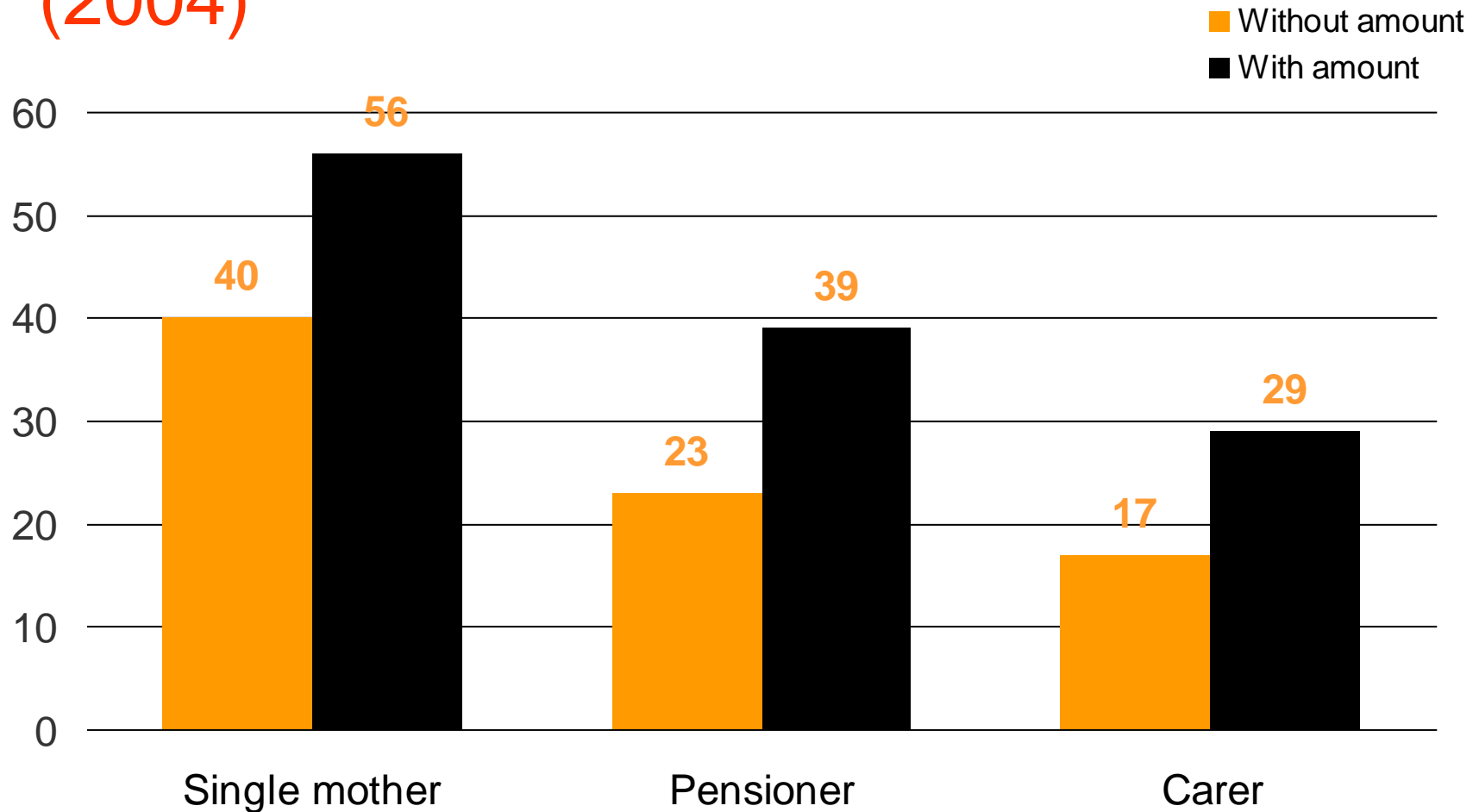
Scenarios – example (3)

And thinking again about that pensioner living alone.

After rent, her only income is £105 a week. Would you say that she...

And thinking again about that woman who can't work because she has to look after her husband or partner who has a long-term illness. After rent, their income is £146 a week. Would you say that they...

% 'more than enough'/'enough', (2004)





Conclusions

Nature of surveys means survey questions can be seen to encourage stereotyping

A number of design techniques help to unpack stereotypical attitudes by examining:

- how pervasive they are (across the population and in different situations)
- how strongly they are held
- the factors related to them
- whether they are grounded in / result from general belief systems
- making use of comparisons



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