Key Concepts in Social Research

Questionnaires

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Questionnaires are the printed sets of questions to be answered by respondents, either through face-to-face interviews or self-completion, as a tested, structured, clearly presented and systematic means of collecting data (mainly in the quantitative methods tradition).

Section Outline: Question format: simple, clear, understandable wording. Pitfalls: too general; double-barrelled questions; threatening; too complicated. Open and closed questions. Showcards. Question sequences. Filters. Self-completion.

In survey research – probably the archetypal example of **Quantitative Methods** – everyone in the sample is systematically asked the same questions, in the same order in each interview and by each interviewer. This is in contrast to in-depth **Interviewing** (see also **Auto/biography and Life Histories; Unobtrusive Methods)**. A list of topics to be included is converted into easily understandable and answerable questions, written down on a standardised form (the 'questionnaire'). Questionnaire design is a deceptively specialist skill, and best not tackled alone. A useful starting point for phrasing questions is the Question Bank (http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk). In designing the questionnaire, there are certain basic rules that should always be followed. These can be divided into pitfalls which you should avoid, types of questions and question order.

It has long been established that *questions must be easily understandable to all respondents* (Payne 1951). Each question should mean the same to everyone involved so that comparable answers are obtained. Thus the language used should be simple, non-technical and unambiguous. For example, a survey on eating patterns should not include questions about **[p. 187 ↓]** 'adequate nutritional requirements' or even 'a balanced diet', since some people would either not understand the terms used or interpret 'adequate', 'nutritional' or 'balanced' by their own standards. Instead, respondents might be asked what they ate during a particular day or their last meal. 'Ate' is better than 'consumed': always use the simplest vocabulary you can. *You* know what you mean, but will others?

This latter test applies to questions that are *too general*. For example, 'What do you think about this area?' might obtain a wider range of non-comparable answers such as 'not a lot' or a very detailed account of the history, environment and social life of the area **(Community Profiles)**. Alternatives to such questions include using a list of

statements that the respondent can agree or disagree with, or you might ask about specific features of the area separately. A general question is, however, useful as an introductory question to put the respondent at ease, rather than providing any data.

Questions that appear to expect a certain answer *(leading questions]* should not be used. Respondents are likely to agree with the sentiments expressed in such questions, believing there is a correct answer, rather than giving their own opinion. ‘Youth crime is a problem in this area, isn't it?’ would be better phrased as ‘In this area, is youth crime a problem?’ or, even better, ‘In this area, which of the following do you think are the main problems?’, followed by a list of possible problems. Note that qualifying phrases (‘in this area’] should come first in the question, to focus respondents before they tackle the more general issue of the main question.

A fourth common error is *combining two or more questions into one*, as for instance in ‘Do you think there should be more recreational facilities and daycare centres for children and older people?’ Here, you cannot know whether the answer is to ‘recreational centres’ or ‘day-care centres’, for ‘children’ or ‘older people’. The question should become four separate questions.

Anything *threatening* or likely to arouse *anxiety* should be avoided by substituting indirect questions. A study of child abuse might therefore not ask about first-hand experience, but instead include questions listing a range of physical and mental abuses, to ascertain those that respondents thought most serious. People feel threatened or anxious about a range of topics, and if questions seem likely to intimidate, then a non-survey method could be considered.

Questions involving complex *knowledge, mental arithmetic* or that need *detailed memory recall* are particular sources of anxiety. They also produce a high proportion of factually incorrect answers. Thus, asking for the average age of people in a household would entail not only knowing **[p. 188 ↓]** everyone's ages, but also being able to *calculate averages in one's head*. Ask for the individual ages, and calculate the averages at the data analysis stage.

There are two main types of questions: ‘open-ended’ and ‘closed’. Open-ended questions leave the answer entirely to the respondent, because the researcher either

has little prior knowledge of possible responses, or feels that more detailed responses might add depth to the survey. For example, ‘In this area, what do you think are the main health problems?’ The layout of the questionnaire should leave sufficient space to record replies verbatim.

Most questions are likely to be phrased in closed format, offering a number of fixed answers from which respondents must choose. However, categories such as ‘Other’ or ‘Don't Know’ are included to cover all possible answers. The main advantage of closed questions is that they are easily classified at the coding stage, or even pre-coded on the questionnaire. The most common type are ‘checklist’ questions, offering several alternatives. For example, ‘What is the main way you travel to work?: walk; cycle; bus; train; car; mixture of these; other’. Here, only one answer can be selected. Alternatively, the respondent may be allowed to select a fixed number of answers or as many as necessary: ‘Which of the following foods have you eaten today?: bread; rice; pasta; potatoes; pastry; eggs; meat; lentils; beans fruit; vegetables’. Most ‘attitude scale’ questions offer a range of five possible responses to opinion statements **(Attitude Scales:** Oppenheim 1992).

Responses for some closed questions can be printed on ‘show cards’. Each response is given a letter or digit, and respondents are asked to select their response to a particular question from a list handed to them, using that letter or number. This saves time and repetition when several questions have the same possible responses, the list is long, or sensitive questions are being asked, because the interviewer only has to read out the question and not the list.

The order of questions has an important influence on the answers. Generally, questions should flow into each other so that the rules of a normal conversation are followed. Sometimes, however, it is possible to ‘hide’ a question among other topics as a way of checking previous responses. The questionnaire's layout should not be crowded: it must be easy for interviewers to use, and ‘instructions’ (e.g. filters) differentiated from the question wordings to be read out.

Often respondents are only required to answer certain questions if they have answered a previous question in a particular way. This question is called a *contingency* or *filter question*. Clearly, to work, filter questions have to be closed. For example, you might

want to ask questions about children **[p. 189 ↓]** only if respondents did have children. The filter would ask if they had children: if the answer was ‘no’, the interviewer's instruction would be to leave out the questions about children: ‘IF NONE, GO TO QUESTION X’. – hence the term ‘skip’ or ‘GOTO’ questions. The other major instruction to interviewers is when to PROBE or PROMPT **(Interviewing)**.

Most of these guidelines apply to *self-completion* questionnaires (including **Internet Polling)**, but no question order can be guaranteed because respondents can choose their own order. Question wording is even more vital, and any filter instructions must be absolutely clear. The questionnaire must be brief, because respondents' attention spans are short. Both types of questionnaire are better suited to collecting ‘factual’ information than more subtle and complex social data, like interaction processes or full meanings. Their success relies heavily on careful design and full pre-testing, prior to going ‘into the field’ **(Social Surveys)**. Equally, if the original concepts and insights are not intriguing, the results will disappoint: ‘If we ask dull questions we shall get dull answers’ (Sapsford 1999: 257).

Designing questionnaires looks simple but it is not. A good rule of thumb is always to work in pairs, and then to use a couple of friends or family members as guinea pigs (they will be your sternest critics!). Even some professional survey researchers sometimes produce seriously deficient questions: on the day this was written YouGov, the internet polling organisation, was running inter alia the following agree/disagree question:

Bologna in Birmingham, Madrid in Manchester; cities in continental Europe are a good example from which our towns could learn.

We might object:

Sadly, standards are not always beyond reproach.

This is often hidden because publishing conventions dictate that most published accounts do not include the questionnaires on which they are **[p. 190 ↓]** based – of course, in *qualitative* research, the questions are even more invisible, and therefore problematic. Questionnaire design is not just a technical matter: Savage

et al. (2001) show how the type of question, and order of presentation affected the *conclusions* drawn in the Essex Class Survey (Marshall et al. 1989 – which includes the questionnaire). Among quantitative studies, the annual British Social Attitudes series (e.g. Park et al. 2002) is another good exception of including the questionnaire, and many questionnaires are available for inspection online from the UK Data Archive (http://www.data-archive.ac.uk). A useful test of your own understanding is to select an example on a topic which interests you, and to review the question wording and sequencing.