

QUESTIONNAIRES: PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

NICK CAMPION

Questionnaires are designed to obtain quantitative data which may be used on their own terms or to support qualitative interpretations. They can be a highly effective means of obtaining information but are also open to misinterpretation. Questionnaires have strengths, but also weaknesses: a questionnaire can only secure information in line with its design. We need to ask what exactly a questionnaire measures – and is it any more than the question which is asked? The PDF posted this week by Judith Bell (*Doing Your Research Project*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002, chap 8, ‘Designing and Administering Questionnaires’), summarises various types of question, but I will make the following distinctions and advice.

You can design a questionnaire as a series of tick boxes from which you will derive mainly quantifiable information on attitudes or behaviour, or as set of invitations for people to state their opinions (‘verbal’ or ‘open’ questions).

For example:

EITHER

1. Have you ever visited a professional astrologer? Yes ☐ No ☐

OR

1. Would you say in your own words (up to 100 words) how you felt when you visited the astrologer?

(NB Descriptive questions – such as ‘can you define....’, - can resemble a mini-structured-interview

OR you can ask multiple choice questions, such as

1. Do you think astronomy is

- a. a science
- b. a means of understanding the mind of God
- c. a form of story-telling

In multiple choice questions you can ask respondents to choose one option, or several, or rank their choices from most favourite to least favourite.

Be careful with leading or ‘presuming’ questions. An example might be, ‘can you estimate how bad your employer is on the attached scale?’, or ‘Does the government spend enough money on counselling?’

(While the simple rule is, don’t ask leading, ‘presuming’, questions, I think you can ask them as long as you know that the answers are in response to a leading question.)

But, never ask either-or-questions (do you read your horoscope once a week or once a month? ‘Do you think more money should be spent on science or the arts?’), as the results will be confusing.

Avoid time unspecific questions: ‘how often do you....?’ ‘Often’ can mean once a day to one person, but once a year to another. Similarly, ‘do you regularly....?’ is likely to yield only uncertain information.

Always check to see if any work has been done in the subject area already. You may decide to ask the same question which have been used in previous research as this can provide a comparison and encourage your own discussion?

You may decide to go on a fishing expedition: do you know what questions are truly relevant until you've asked them?

Sample Size

Decide on your distribution target – 20? 40? Are you going to target specific groups? Will you distribute it by e mail, or personally to individuals or groups, or will you stand in your local shopping centre?

Do you want to test a pilot? Usually this is not necessary and would be only for larger studies. However, if you can manage it, a pilot might be useful.

Remember though, this is not a definitive exercise. You are learning a research skill and you will be tested on how well you design and report on the research project in terms of your understanding of the relevant literature on qualitative research and your ability to contextualise and analyse your findings.

Layout

Keep your layout clear.

Always thank respondents for answering

Always assure respondents of anonymity.

Computerisation

There are computer packages which can analyse data and produce graphs and charts.

Microsoft Excel is cheap and available, while SNAP is complicated and available usually only through universities. However, for a project of this size computerisation is not essential. It's useful, but not as much as your ability to conduct a well-reasoned project.