

POLI 344

Methods of Political Research

SESSION 8: QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

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2014/2015 – 2016/2017



Questionnaire Design

Introduction

In this session we will go through the process of designing a questionnaire and learn how to design questions for the questionnaire.

Questionnaire Content

Introduction

A questionnaire provides the researcher the opportunity to collect data. It is therefore important for the researcher to make the most of the opportunity to gather data.

Questionnaire Design

For this reason questionnaire design requires careful preparation and is time consuming.

A questionnaire relies on the representativeness of the sample which requires that as many people in the sample as possible answer all the questions.

The questionnaire aims to achieve two main things:

- An accurate completion
- A high response rate

Questionnaire Design

There are many ways in which to maximize the possibilities of an accurate completion and a high response rate. This involves considering the questionnaire from the point of view of the researcher and the respondents. This should be borne in mind for all aspects of the questionnaire design.

The Content

Be Focused

The questionnaire must be focused. It is very important to be clear about subject area and what you want to know.

Questionnaire Design

This is important from the point of view of you respondents because if a questionnaire is long and/or complicated they are less likely to complete, or to complete accurately. It is also important from the researcher's point of view because an excessively long or complicated questionnaire may lead to irrelevant data and/or far too much of it.

A prerequisite to questionnaire design is, therefore, a clear thesis/project outline which leads to a well focused questionnaire.

Questionnaire Design

Knowledge of the potential sample is also crucial because this will inform your approach, for example, what kind of questions are appropriate and what format of questions to use. When you have a clear idea of what information you want, you can begin to think about questions you might ask.

Consider the following:

Memory

Think about these issues

Are you asking people to remember a fact or event? For example, How did you feel when you found out about

Questionnaire Design

such and such? This is potentially problematic because people may forget how they felt in the past. Alternatively they may have reconstructed memories in the light of subsequent events.

Sensitive issues.

It is possible to alienate respondents by asking questions they may be sensitive about answering for example, questions about racist attitudes. This may lead to non-completion. Considerations for questions about sensitive issues include phrasing and word order.

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Information

Are you asking for information that people will have as their fingertips or will they have to search through records to find out? If they have to search for information, they are less likely to complete the questionnaire.

Activity

Activity

Think of four questions on a topic you have chosen that are appropriate and the format of questions to use for your questionnaire.

1.....

2.....

3.....

4.....



Summary

Summary

A prerequisite to questionnaire design is a clear project/thesis outline. A good knowledge of the potential sample is also crucial as this will inform your approach. When you have a clear idea of what information you want, you can begin to think about questions you might ask.



Questionnaire Design

Open or Closed Questions

Introduction

The design of a questionnaire requires the use of two broad types of question formats namely open and closed questions. This is what this section looks at.

The main choice here is whether you ask a question and leave a space for the respondent to give an answer in their own words or whether you provide a range of answers from which the respondent can choose.

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Open-ended Questions

The first type of question, as outlined above, is called an open-ended question. The advantage is that respondents have complete freedom to answer the question; they can use their own words and raise issues that are important to them, issues which a researcher may not have considered. Some argue that as a result, the use of open-ended questions reduce how far the researcher imposed their own understanding of the situation. While this may be the case, the fact that a particular question was asked in a particular form will have done this to a certain extent.

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In addition to this, there is also impact of analysis. Each completed question will lead to an individual answer, which must be categorized prior to data analysis. Categorization aims to remain faithful to the intention of the respondent, but reading and categorizing an answer also imply a degree of interpretation.

Handy Tip

A practical point to consider in relation to open ended questions is that in the context of a self completion questionnaire, you will also have to be able to read respondents' hand writing.

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Closed Questions

The alternative to open-ended questions is closed questions. This type of question provides a range of answers for selection by the respondent. This has the effect of guiding respondents through completing the questionnaire which respondents may find easier than answering open-ended questions. This may have positive effect on accuracy of completion and response rates. It is to be noted, however, that some respondents may feel that they cannot express themselves if asked questions in this way and may respond badly.

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Analysis of closed questions is relatively straightforward. Answers can be entered on a spreadsheet directly. This, however, is because careful thought about answers and analysis took place earlier, when the questions were designed.



Activity

Activity

Try these examples. Would you select open-ended or closed questions for the following surveys?

A survey of school children's opinions about school dinners

A survey of the reasons why graduates chose a career in banking

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Open-ended or closed questions?

A survey of school children's opinions about school feeding. Closed questions may be the best option because they will guide children's completion. This would also reduce the potential for 'jockey insults' that might eliminate useless data.

A survey of the reasons why Ghanaian graduates chose a career in banking. It would be possible to use some open-ended questions because of the high level of literacy of respondents. It may also be preferable because for many respondents their career choice

Questionnaire Design

may hinge on personal or detailed reasons which would not fit a closed question format. The design of a questionnaire requires the use of two broad types of question formats namely open and closed questions. There are different types of closed questions. The basis for selection of a type relates to analytical need; what kind of data would be most useful.

Category

Ask a question and provide respondents with a range of answers from which they must select one answer.

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Example

Do you think that boys and girls should be taught together in school?

1. Yes all the time
2. Yes, most of the time
3. Yes, some of the time
4. No, not at all

The answers provided are exhaustive (cover all options) and are mutually exclusive (can only give one answer).

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List

Ask a question and provide respondents with a list of options and they can select as many as they want. For example, which of the following activities do you enjoy?

1. The cinema
2. A meal in a restaurant
3. An evening in the pub
4. A football match

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Lists Often have a final option of 'Other' to include those options not anticipated by the researcher. This may be extended to 'Other, please specify' if this would provide data that would be of interest. Asking respondents to rank the list in order of importance can collect more detailed data. For example, put 1 in the box of the activity that you enjoy most, 2 in the box of the activity you enjoy second.

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- The cinema []
- A meal in a restaurant []
- An evening in the pub []
- A football match []
- When asking respondents to rank a list, bear in mind that this is a complex question to answer, particularly if there is a long list. It is easier to rank three things in order of preference rather than six, for example. Bear this in mind for accuracy of completion.

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Scale

Scale can be used to find out opinions or attitudes. A widely used scale is the Likert scale. For example, here is a list of things your child might do in Religious Education in school. Please show whether you agree or disagree with each of these things by putting a tick in the space that most clearly represents YOUR view.

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Don't know
4. Disagree
5. Strongly disagree

Activity

Activity

Develop a set of closed ended questions on the background of students at the University using the following:

1. Region of origin,
2. Hall of residence
3. Course major
4. Course level



Summary

Summary

In summary, when selecting open-ended or closed questions, weigh up the advantages in terms of the type of data collected, accuracy of completion and response rate. We have learned about the development of closed-ended questions for questionnaires particularly in the creation of lists.



Questionnaire Design

Phrasing the Questions

Introduction

In the previous section we learned about the creation of closed ended questions through the use of lists. In this section we will look at the phrasing of questions.

Questions need to be clear, unambiguous and uniformly workable. The first stage in the process of developing questions is writing and rewriting questions.

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To begin the process, write a first draft of your questionnaire. Take time to consider each question individually in relation to the following points.

Handy tips

Avoid having too many questions which ask 'Why?' because the answers can be difficult to categorize. They can usually be rephrased so as to ask 'What?'

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Avoid long or complex questions because respondents may lose track of what you are asking. Rewrite the question in simpler language and consider whether it is possible to rewrite it as two shorter questions.

Avoid being vague because respondents may not be clear what they are being asked. This is partly a matter of the language you use. It is also essential that you are clear what you want to know. If you are not being precise, think again about your subject area and the aims of the survey.

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Consider the use of jargon. If you are writing for professionals you need to use the language they use. They may often not regard it as jargon but as technically correct language. If, however, you are writing for non-professionals, you need to avoid words with which they are not familiar because if they don't understand correctly, they may give an irrelevant answer or not answer at all.

Consider whether the wording of the question encourages the respondent to give a particular answer.

Activity

Activity

Which of the following questions is more likely to lead to a yes answer?

- a) Do you think this is a good idea?' or
- b) Do you agree or disagree with this statement?'

Respondent's knowledge. Do not assume knowledge that the respondent may not have. For example, the question, 'Do you agree with the legal age of consent?' assumes that respondents are aware of the legal age of consent

Summary

This may not be the case and it is a better idea to state the law and then ask for their opinion.

Summary

We have learnt in section 3 that to write good questions we need to be clear, unambiguous and uniform. There is need in developing questions to write and rewrite questions. Each question has to be considered individually in relation to the issues under research.



Questionnaire Design

Order of Questions

Introduction

In questionnaire construction, it is important to pay attention to the order of questions. This section looks at the issue of order of questions. There is the need to vary the orientation of questions because people are inclined to answer yes - encourage "yea saying and nay saying". For example, if you can predict a series of attitudes/ answers to questions then phrase those questions so that someone with a consistent point of view will answer 'yes' to some and 'no' to others.

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If the questionnaire includes questions of a sensitive nature, place these at the end of the questionnaire. Respondents are less likely to abandon completion if they have already answered most of the questions. Socio-demographic questions are often more sensitive than you might expect. You can split them into two parts with non-sensitive ones coming early (e.g. gender, job title) and sensitive ones at the end (e.g. income, religious affiliation).

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Layout

Once you have settled the wording of questions, think about the layout of the questionnaire. To assist completion, the layout of the questionnaire should be clear and uncluttered. Options to consider are spacing of questions, and size font and font style of lettering. For example, the questions could be in *bold* to draw attention.

All information necessary for completion of questions should be included, for example, people may not turn the page if you don't put PTO [please turn over].

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Covering Letter or Verbal Introduction to the Questionnaire

For postal surveys you will need to write a covering letter. For structured interviews you will need to prepare a verbal introduction. This is your chance to explain the questionnaire and persuade the potential respondent to complete it and return it.

Keep it as succinct as possible. Only give information that is needed. Use clear, precise language.

Activity

Activity

Note down the circumstances under which postal questionnaires would be a more appropriate research tool than personal interviews.

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Questionnaire Design

Points to remember when writing a covering letter

A short explanation of the research project

Make it appropriate to the addressee. Highlight aspects that will interest them. Use an appropriate style, e.g. informal or strictly professional. Get their attention. For example, many professional people receive several questionnaires a week - why should they notice yours?

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Encouragement to respond

Refer to a sponsor of the project. For example, a well-known person or organization in the field might encourage people to respond. Give information about plans for the findings. If the respondents will benefit, tell them how. If the data are to be kept confidential, say so.

Questionnaire Design

Provide clear instructions on the following:

- How to complete the questionnaire
- How to return the completed questionnaire

Pilot Study

- Designing an effective questionnaire that will yield appropriate data is a long process. An important part of this process is to test the questionnaire on a group of people similar to your intended sample.

Questionnaire Design

The pilot study provides the researcher with a trial run at administering a questionnaire and analyzing data, including categorizing answers to open-ended questions. It also provides feedback on the questions, which can be used to further refine the phrasing and layout of questions.

- A pilot study administered as the main study. The sample should have similar characteristics to the intended sample although it will be smaller than the main sample.

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For example, in the process of carrying out a survey of roughly 300 school pupils in 6 schools, the pilot study was based on 50 questionnaires from two schools.

Refining questions: Take time to consider each question individually in relation to the following points.

- Were there any questions that were consistently completed incorrectly?
- The question may have been unclear, so rewrite. Alternatively the answering instructions may have been unclear, so consider changing the format,

Questionnaire Design

for example from an open-ended to a closed question.

- Were there any questions that were consistently not answered?
- The respondents may not have understood the question, so rewrite. Alternatively, they may have chosen not to answer because it concerned a sensitive subject or asked for information that they did not have, consider changing or omitting the question.

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In response to a closed question, did many respondents tick 'Other' and specify the same thing?

Add this to the list of options.

Consider all responses to open-ended questions.

Are they providing the data you expected? If not, respondents may be misunderstanding the meaning, rewrite questions.

Questionnaire Design

Which of the following questions is more likely to lead to a 'yes' answer?

- Do you think this is a good idea?' or
- Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
- The first question implies that the researcher considers the 'yes' to be the appropriate answer by referring to it as 'a good idea.' This may encourage respondents to answer 'yes'.

Summary

Summary

In this section we have stressed the importance of ensuring you are focused when designing your questions such that they are easy for the respondent to understand and that you undertake a pilot study.

