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Surveys and Questionnaires – or How Can I Conduct Research with People at a Distance?

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Introduction

Surveys and questionnaires are, in many disciplines and in many subject areas, almost the common-sense approach to doing social research. Businesses ask us to fill in surveys as to how effective their service was, and public organisations send out questionnaires asking us how well they are doing, what they could be doing better and what we would like them to do in the future. Given their extraordinarily widespread usage, it is remarkable how badly surveys and questionnaires are often done. We have all been sent forms that seem to go on forever, having little regard for the time subjects have to take in filling them in, surveys where questions don't seem to make much sense, or questionnaires which don't provide us with any chance to explain that answers we give, leading to us becoming frustrated and either throwing the form away rather than returning it, or leaving an online form half-filled in.

This chapter considers when and where it is appropriate to use questionnaires, gives some pointers on how they can be designed to get them returned and filled in, and considers how to ask questions that subjects won't find confusing. It then moves on to explore some contentious issues in relation to this type of research, including sampling, response rates and the role of anonymity, before coming to a conclusion about when surveys and questionnaires are appropriate, how they can be used and what assumptions about social research they contain.

The Use of Questionnaires – the Best (and Worst) of Quantitative (and Qualitative) Social Research

Surveys and Questionnaires

An initial distinction that we have to begin with is the difference between a survey and a questionnaire. This isn't a difference that we need to get too preoccupied with, as in many disciplines the terms are used more or less synonymously, but technically a survey is a research design that takes a cross-sectional approach. This means it is based on a sample, with the aim being to have as large a sample as is necessary to capture all of the variation in the population; that it occurs at a single point in time (or as near as possible to a single point in time); it is predominantly quantitative; and the aim is to seek patterns within that quantitative data. A questionnaire is a type of survey – but there are many other examples of survey design, including quantitative explorations of text (as with content analysis) and highly structured observation, as might be used

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in organisational analysis in time and motion studies.

A questionnaire is a type of survey involving, unsurprisingly, asking subjects to respond to a range of questions, often in a self-completion form. Questionnaires represent the best and worst of social research. They are widely used because they are relatively simple to put together and they are cheap because they often don't involve researchers having to find time to gather data personally, as they would have to do for interviews or participant observation. They are versatile because they can be used in a variety of ways right across the social science disciplines, and because they can produce data that can be used to test hypotheses as well as gather qualitative responses. Questionnaires are widely used, and there are good guides offering advice on how to construct them. However, they are also just about impossible to get perfect – different subjects respond to different words and concepts in different ways, and you get only one chance at asking your questions. Unlike an interview, you don't get to clarify when subjects don't appear to understand what it is you are asking, so any mistakes acquire a rather embarrassing permanence and any omissions will be absent for everyone you send the questions to. It is easy to put together questionnaires, but also easy to get them very wrong.

Perspectives on Questionnaires

Choosing to use a questionnaire in a research design is a choice that carries with it a series of assumptions. Different kinds of questionnaires have different presumptions about the kind of knowledge they are trying to produce, and it is important that the implications of these choices are thought through.

Chapter 1 argues that different approaches to social research produce different kinds of knowledge. We can illustrate this by making use of three different perspectives and comparing what difference they might make in a questionnaire design.

Three Perspectives on Social Research

A hypothetico-deductive perspective, as the name suggests, is based on an experimental method, with a view that social research is about testing hypotheses using deductive methods. This is most likely to favour a quantitative approach.

A hypothetico-deductive perspective on a questionnaire will privilege the testing of hypotheses, which themselves will be derived from existing theory. Quantitative data will be preferred because of the relative lack of ambiguity in terms of testing hypotheses, and so the design of the questionnaire will tend towards closed-response questions (see below). The aim of the study will be theory generation through hypotheses testing.

A realist approach, in contrast, would accept along with the hypothetico-deductive view that the point of social research is to find out about the external world, but suggest that our ability to gain access to the world is limited by our perceptions of it. As such, social research in this perspective requires us to find underlying,

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generative causes of behaviour that cannot be simply modelled using experiments.

A realist perspective on questionnaire design will also privilege theory testing, but is much more likely to utilise mixed methods than one based solely around a hypothetico-deductive design. The quantitative element of a questionnaire will serve purposes such as looking for potential generative mechanisms by seeking promising patterns between measurable variables, whilst at the same time acknowledging the difficulties in finding measurable indicators of complex social phenomena. A quantitative survey might be useful in a mixed-methods design, preceding qualitative research in order to find promising patterns of variables that can be subject to more detailed analysis through it. However, realists also acknowledge that interpretations of the external world vary between research subjects and societal groups, and so it will also be necessary to conduct qualitative work, which questionnaires can be a part of through open-response questions, in order to capture differences in interpretation and understanding which are likely to exist.

Finally, an idealist perspective would go further again, suggesting that speculation about some kind of real world is largely pointless because we can never gain access to it except through our own senses and ideas. As such, the point of social research is to understand our subjectivities and interpretations of the world.

An idealist perspective on questionnaires is likely to be more problematic about their use. Idealists may believe that a pre-designed questionnaire is unlikely to be able to adequately capture the inter-subjectivity of the social world – with participant observation and unstructured interviews being preferred. Where questionnaires are used, they will prefer open-response questions in order to allow research subjects to speak using their own words, and to impose the very minimum of the researcher's concepts and ideas upon the research.

The three perspectives on surveys are compared in Table 3.1.

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Table 3.1 Different perspectives on questionnaire design

	Hypothetico-deductive	Realist	Idealist
Aim of study	Testing of theory (deduction)	Finding the appropriate theory (abduction)	Finding out participants' interpretations of the world (induction)
Favoured methods	Quantitative	Mixed methods	Qualitative
Types of question	Closed-response questions	Open- and closed-response questions	Open-response questions
Example	Measuring income, height, weight – anything that can be placed into a category and correlations with other categories sought	Looking for relationships in complex social phenomena – social deprivation, education, inequality	Exploring participants' understandings of gender, ethnicity
Typical problem	Categories not being appropriate for what is attempting to be measured	Difficulties in combining methods and complexity of design	Lots of open-response questions may result in non-completions

As such, questionnaires vary considerably depending on the perspective the researcher takes on their research. But the use of questionnaires also varies considerably on their purpose in social research. It is to this topic that the chapter therefore turns.

Designing Questionnaires

The purpose of a questionnaire in your research design will considerably affect its design and use. There are a number of possible purposes. Are you trying to scope (or initially explore the boundaries of) an area that you don't know much about? Are you testing hypotheses that you have generated from existing research or from your own ideas? Do you want to test a series of propositions that you have about a particular social area? Are you testing a new instrument or concept you want to use to measure a particular social phenomenon? Are you trying to estimate the attributes of a population from the sample you are investigating? Flexibility is a significant strength of questionnaire research, but it can also be a weakness where researchers try and achieve too many goals with the same instrument.

A scoping questionnaire might be as qualitative as quantitative in order to allow participants to make as many open-ended responses as possible and to avoid researchers imposing their ideas unnecessarily upon the instrument, and so the possible responses that can be made. We have all seen questionnaires that don't provide us with the option that we really want to choose – I prefer to think of myself as being European rather than British, but often I'm not given this option in questionnaires.

To test a series of propositions, questionnaires can be set up in a more quantitative way to collect responses on the extent to which subjects agree with those propositions (and variations on them). This is one of the most

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straightforward and widely used forms of questionnaire. So we might be asked how much (or little) we agree with the sentence that Margaret Thatcher was the best post-war British Prime Minister (not at all, a little, quite a lot, a great deal). To validate an instrument, a questionnaire can be distributed to a group that is regarded, because of previous research, to have the characteristics that the instrument is designed to measure, in order to see whether the instrument appears to capture that characteristic or not. So, an instrument designed to measure the degree of formality in an organisation might be issued to an organisation previous research has shown to be hierarchical and rule-following, as well as to one which we believe to have the opposite characteristics, to see if those differences are captured.

To estimate the attributes of a population from a sample, which is another popular use of questionnaires, we need to pay even more attention to sampling than usual in order to make sure inferences from sample to population are statistically valid. We might be interested, for example, in trying to assess a political party's chances in the next election, and so attempt to construct a sample that is representative of the population of the voting country in order to achieve that goal. We might utilise a questionnaire designed to measure stress in a particular workplace, such as a university, and so send that instrument to a sample of staff in such a place. We can then compare results with other universities, as well as between departments within that university.

So the aim of a questionnaire is likely to shape a range of design issues within it, including the extent to which it utilises open and closed responses, the extent to which sampling is a significant issue and the type of questions we ask within it. These issues can now be explored in more depth.

Open and Closed Responses

Open-ended questions are those where subjects are asked to give a response in their own terms. There are two main reasons for doing this. The first is that you wish to gather information about a topic where it is impractical to give all of the possible options in the questionnaire. If we want to know someone's name, it doesn't make a lot of sense to try and list all the possibilities, but simply to allow them to give it. A second reason for using open responses is to avoid imposing the researcher's ideas and concepts upon the respondent. This means that researchers get data back that is in the respondents' own words, and which therefore might contain vital clues to the concepts and words they believe are appropriate rather than imposing what the researcher thinks is relevant.

So instead of asking, ‘Is recycling an excellent idea, a good idea, something you don't feel strongly about, or a bad idea?’, and getting respondents to tick appropriate boxes through a closed-response system, we might ask, ‘What do you think about recycling?’ to try and get a more nuanced view that allows respondents to use their own evaluative words and ideas.

Closed-ended questions ask respondents, in contrast, to give their answers according to possibilities that the researcher has predefined, as in the first recycling question above. This requires the researcher to have a good idea of the likely responses to the questions, and to make sure that they are covered in the options that

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are available to respondents. If the advantage of open-ended questions is that they allow respondents to use their own words and concepts, the advantages of closed-ended questions is that they reduce ambiguity by allowing greater precision in question-asking, they allow respondents to be asked similar questions several times to cross-check for validity and consistency, and they are far easier to interpret. Closed-ended questions can be answered quickly, meaning that respondents are more likely to answer several of them than open-ended questions, and as long as you have come up with appropriate answering options, you can collect a great deal of easy-to-analyse data extremely efficiently.

Both open- and closed-ended questions have their disadvantages. Open-ended questions take longer to answer, so questionnaires that extensively utilise them risk not being completed. Equally, they require far more care and time to analyse adequately, and may require researchers with different skills to work together in order to achieve rigour in both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the questionnaire. Closed-ended questions fall down when the response options offered to respondents are inadequate, and they always carry the risk of respondents not being able to give unexpected answers, so limiting the range of responses that can appear. Closed-ended questions also have to be extremely clear in terms of both the questions that they ask and the responses that are allowed, with designs being carefully tested to check for ambiguities and confusions. Open-ended questions also need to be checked carefully, but offer some chance of collecting useful data even where there are problems in question phrasing as respondents still have the opportunities to express thoughts in their own words, whereas misunderstandings in closed-ended questions may be difficult or even impossible to pick up. Complex social science concepts can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways, and can be the source of considerable confusion if not used carefully, and using local language, or indeed failing to use local language where appropriate, can result in respondent confusion and gathering poor quality data.

An example of a questionnaire going wrong which relates to my own work is through the student surveys of my courses. Every year, without fail, a student will fill in the university-designed survey incorrectly so that I get some (unintentional) bad grades because the student, in a rush, simply ticked the 1s on the list, thinking they were the highest rating, when the 5s were instead. They will then leave a comment at the end saying that the course was good, not realising that their response to the closed-ended questions was entirely the wrong way around.

The language and concepts used in questionnaires, both in their instructions and their questions, is therefore extremely important. It is vital that researchers make use of existing studies and pilots in order to find out not only what likely respondents regard as the important questions that they believe should be asked about the research area, but also the way that they need to be phrased, and the responses that they need to be offered. Preliminary interviews or focus groups can be extremely useful in this respect where they allow potential respondents to use their own words and ideas, as is carrying out a pilot study of the questionnaire to try and look out for problems in design before the main study begins.

Getting Questions Really Clear

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It isn't possible to take readers through a complete guide on how to write questions. What I can do, however, is point out several mistakes that are often made, and then ask readers to look at their own questions to assess the extent to which they suffer from them. As I suggested above, no questionnaire is ever going to be perfect. What we can do, however, is to try and make it as error-free as possible.

Ambiguity and Vagueness

Any aspect of ambiguity will mean that your respondents won't know what was asked of them, and so any answers they do provide will detract, rather than add, to your research. In closed-response questions this is especially important because respondents may not have the opportunity to tell the researcher of the problems they are having filling in that question.

Let's say you have created a question that asks respondents to judge how often they feel stress during a working day. You might then attach frequencies to that question of ‘frequently, often, infrequently and never’. However, there are problems in terms of the question and response here. Unless we are being clear about ‘stress’ elsewhere in the questionnaire, we are leaving it open to widely different interpretations. That might be part of our research design, if we are interested in stress as a subjective experience rather than as an objective condition, but we must be explicit about what it is we are trying to find out. Equally, having responses such as ‘frequently’ poses a number of problems for our research. How often is frequently exactly? Once an hour? Once a minute? That leads to an additional ambiguity and so difference between respondents. Again, if we are interested in the subjective experience of stress, that might not be a problem – we are getting an assessment both of the subjective condition and its subject frequency. However, it does present problems in comparing respondents' answers, which may be one of the main aims of constructing the questionnaire in the first place.

A second source of ambiguity comes when asking questions about concepts which might be interpreted differently between respondents, or even misunderstood by them. If we are to ask about the ‘organisational culture’ of the place where people work, this might be interpreted in lots of different ways, or even regarded as a term that has no meaning for particular respondents. This might be made even worse by asking respondents if they believe that the ‘organisational culture’ is ‘weak’ or ‘strong’. We might then run the risk of having ambiguities, again, for both our possible responses and the terms we are asking about.

Hypothetical Questions and Abstractness

There are lots of circumstances where we might ask a respondent to imagine themselves in a particular situation and to give their reaction or response to it. However, the more abstract the hypothetical situation, the more difficult it might be getting a consistent or sensible response. Many people, quite reasonably, will not answer questions when asked to imagine scenarios they believe to be unlikely or ridiculous, and we have to be careful to make sure that we don't alienate people when they are doing us the favour of filling in our questionnaire.

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Questionnaires examining, for example, theories of justice can fall into this trap. The work of John Rawls (1995) sets up an ‘original position’ in which he asks us to imagine that we have to come up with a fair way of distributing society's resources with the life experiences that we have now, but not knowing what position or role in society that we would have. This is designed to try and get us to think about what would be fair in a society, based not on the position we presently occupy, but on the assumption that we could end up being born into any position with it. Now we might want to find out how people respond to Rawls's ‘original position’, and research has already attempted to do this (Freeman, 2005). But asking people to make such a complex suspension of belief is extremely difficult, and may end up with them asking why on earth they are doing it, and not wanting to participate.

Leading Questions

There are two categories of leading questions – questions that attempt to impose a view upon the respondent and get them to agree or disagree, and questions that less obviously lead respondents down a particular path of reasoning and so influence the answers that they give.

The first category of leading questions comes when a question asks something like, ‘Given the present government has failed to tackle crime, are you more likely to vote Republican at the next election?’ What is going on here is that the question is trying to smuggle in a presupposition as a fact and to get the respondent to react to that. The previous question could also be worded, ‘Assuming that the present government has failed to tackle crime or, ‘If the present government failed to tackle crime Equally, leading questions can be more subtle, asking questions along the line of, ‘Do you agree that the present government has failed to tackle crime?’, which again contain a presupposition around which the respondent has to try and orient themselves before they answer.

A second problem with leading questions comes through the sequence with which questions appear in the questionnaire. This can be explicit, or rather subtle. An example of an explicit sequence of leading questions would be to compare the questions in Table 3.2 (reading each sequence in turn from top to bottom). This example makes widespread use of leading questions in an obvious way, but also, through the sequence of questions, could lead to a very different response to the third question, even from the same respondent. It is important to ask if your questionnaire is leading people to answer in a particular way because of the questions you have asked them *before.*

Table 3.2 Two question sequences

Sequence one	Sequence two
Is it fair for one person to take another's life?	Is it right that jailing convicted murderers have to be paid for by taxpayers who have done nothing wrong?
Does killing another person, in your opinion, contravene religious or moral laws?	Do you agree that the murderers of children and policemen should get away with only life imprisonment, with the potential to receive a reduced sentence if they behave well in prison?

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Should the death penalty be introduced for murder in the UK?	Should the death penalty be introduced for murder in the UK?

A more subtle form of leading questions comes because of ‘anchoring’, or the way that humans appear to base their current answers on the answers they gave a few moments ago. This is clearly related to the kind of leading sequences shown above, but can also occur through less obvious means. If you start filling a questionnaire with closed responses in a particular range, unless you are paying close attention, you might continue down the page or form in roughly the same range – anchoring your answer to the first response you gave. Another example of this is given by Dan Ariely (2008). If you ask someone to think of the last three digits of their social security or national insurance code, and then ask them to estimate something that they are unlikely to know, such as the birth year of Ivan the Terrible, those with smaller numbers in the last three digits of their code are likely to guess lower than those that have higher numbers in the last three digits. We can be quite subtly influenced by number sequences.

What this means is that if we ask respondents to think about numbers or frequencies in question after question, they are likely to ‘anchor’ and so answer in clusters of about the same values rather than thinking about each one individually. We need to safeguard against this by having section breaks in the questionnaire where we introduce new topics, by having checks to validate answers in different sections, or by mixing up open- and closed-response questions.

Value Judgements

A similar problem to that of leading questions is where questions express particular value judgements, again to safeguard against imposing the researcher's view of the world on participants.

Asking Two (or More) Questions in One

It can be extremely tempting, in order to keep questionnaires short, for researchers to try and jam as much material as possible into a question. However, where this leads into asking two or more questions at once, it can again lead to poor data being collected. So were we to ask, ‘Do you agree that the government is doing enough to raise awareness of environmental problems, and should refuse collection be better geared to aid recycling?’, it might appear on some readings that the (rather long) question is about the same subject, when the two parts of the question could lead to different answers from the same respondents. People might, for example, disagree with the idea that the government is doing enough to raise awareness of environment problems, but agree with refuse collection being reorganised to make recycling more straightforward. How are they meant to answer the (double) question then?

Hidden Assumptions

Again, similar to leading questions, poor questions can contain assumptions about participants that can lead

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to them becoming annoyed at the questions, and not filling in the questionnaire. ‘What is your job?’ is fine for people in work, but those out of work might find it to be thoughtless.

Sensitive Issues

If you are going to ask people about issues that they find sensitive, then you are going to decrease your chances of them filling in your questions. Sensitive issues vary culturally, so there is a real need to be thoughtful about what they might be for the group you are investigating. Questions about sex and sexuality, death, religion and those which imply some kind of neglect or other failing on the part of respondents are obvious candidates in most places, however, to raise sensitive issues. If you are investigating such areas, a great deal of thought and care need to be taken to avoid giving offence or causing embarrassment.

Common Response Forms

Having thought about your questions, you need to then have several options about how you can get participants to fill in their responses. Where you are asking for open responses, then you need to get the question right, but also to allow sufficient space for participants to fill in their reply. Giving too little space is going to result in frustration and a sense from your respondents that you don't really want to know what they have to say.

Closed-response forms come in a number of formats. In categorical formats, respondents can tick or circle items that you list for them, choosing more than one if the question allows. You can ask people to circle one category for age groups or to answer whether they consider themselves male or female, but may want them to tick or circle more than one answer to a question that tries to find out which from a list of items they have purchased in the last week.

Rating Scales

Rating scales are commonly used in questionnaires to get respondents to answer whether they agree with statements with ratings such as ‘strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, strongly disagree’. Whether to offer an ‘uncertain’ or ‘don't know’ option on such scales is a source of considerable debate. Intuitively it seems to make sense to give respondents this option as, about some things, we are genuinely indifferent. What does seem important, however, is that you consider whether including such an option for the question you are asking is going to help with your research. In some circumstances, indifference might be an important response. In others, you might believe that it is important to get respondents to express an opinion that tends to one end of your rating scale or another.

A ranking format asks respondents to examine a list of items and specify either which are the most important from the list, or to rank all of the items in order of importance. So we might ask the public to rank which social issues they believe are most worthy of government support, or which characteristics of a new product would

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be of most benefit to them. In general, though, the more items that appear on a ranking list, and the more items you ask them to rank within it, the more likely people are going to get fed up in trying to come up with an answer. Keeping the list short, but including options that are relevant, is the challenge here.

Think of, for example, a survey that attempts to find out which improvements the local council should fund. A list of five items (new bus stop, new street lights, speed cameras, more frequent rubbish collections, more speed bumps) would be more easily ranked than a list of ten items, but might omit the improvement that people would like the most (such as more frequent police patrols) – so the list would be easier to rank, but lose its legitimacy in achieving the aim of the research in the first place.

Questionnaire Design

Questionnaire design varies considerably depending on a variety of factors explored above, but again a few general things can be suggested.

I have already mentioned the importance of thinking about question order above – there is now a great deal of evidence suggesting that the order you ask your questions in will affect the results you get. You need to consider this carefully to try and avoid leading respondents down particular paths. However, there are also some other general considerations.

First, if you are relying upon particular aspects of the questionnaire to be returned to you in order to be able to carry out even basic analysis, then it makes sense to ask these questions as early as possible. Even if it isn't completely filled in, the form may still be able to contribute valuable data to the project. Second, it may help to put relatively straightforward questions at the end of your questionnaire, as people will be able to fill them in without having to give the matter much thought – putting complex and difficult questions at the end is likely to result in them not being filled in. Equally, putting sensitive questions right at the beginning of a questionnaire is likely to lead to a low response rate because of the risk of them appearing abrupt and cold.

How long a questionnaire should be depends considerably on the subject area and how important people regard it as being. Having a very short form has the advantage of people not perceiving it to be much work, and so increasing the likelihood of them filling it in. However, short forms can also appear frivolous, especially where they are about topics that respondents regard as being important to them. As a general rule, though, think about who is going to be responding to your questionnaire, and how long they are prepared to give to your research. Questionnaires that are too long run the considerable risk of ending up in the nearest bin.

Filter Questions

The use of filter questions is a feature of questionnaire design that can help keep questions focused on the characteristics so far given by respondents, but can run the risk of making your form more complicated. Filter questions (where you say, if you answered ‘yes’ to question 1, go to question 5, for example) can help your

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questionnaire retain relevance for respondents – no-one wants to fill in a form that asks them lots of irrelevant questions and seems to have been poorly thought out. However, filter questions make the process of filling the form in more complex, so need to be used with care, or respondents may get confused and start filling in the form incorrectly, again leading to data coming back incomplete or incorrect.

Question Density

Question density is another feature of design that needs some attention. If you are trying to cram as many questions as possible onto your form, there is a tendency to use smaller fonts and to allow little space for open-response form answers, but that, as noted above, is an error. If you find that your questions do not fit onto the space you have allowed for them, then you need to think again about your design.

Having explored many of the issues that arise in relation to the design of questionnaires it is worth thinking through some of problems that can arise in terms of analysing and presenting your results.

Analysing and Reporting Questionnaire Responses

One of the most common problems researchers find when analysing their first questionnaire is how to both examine each question's responses individually and to tell a coherent story about what the results as a whole seem to add up to. This often results in researchers presenting a blow-by-blow analysis of the answers to each question individually, giving both statistical and graphical treatment of each result, before moving on to the next.

Conventions on how questionnaire results should be presented do vary from discipline to discipline. However, it is important for researchers to bear in mind the research questions which prompted the questionnaire design in the first place, and to make sure that the analysis and presentation of results are geared to answering those questions rather than getting subsumed in exploring every dimension of every question that ended up on the final form. What your readers will want to know about is what you have found about your research area, not your thoughts on your detailed analysis of every single question in your questionnaire. Of course, once you have presented your interpretation of the results, you need to be able to justify it by showing your analysis of questions, but even then it is often better to show data the links responses on several questions rather than expecting your reader to work through your results by showing every kind of analysis you performed on every question on your questionnaire. Think carefully about what results seem to you to be especially important or interesting, make clear to your reader what those are and make sure that you present the analysis or tests that back up those findings.

Think carefully also about your presentation of results. There is a strong tendency for you to want to present your reader with every test you have performed on your data in the name of completeness, and to show all the hard work you have done. But would you want to read such an account? It is a good discipline for you to try and work out what the headlines are from the research you've conducted, and to explain as concisely

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as you reasonably can your answers to your research questions. Once you know this, you can work out what evidence you need to show to support those claims and what the best way of presenting that evidence will be. Think about who your audience is – a peer-reviewed journal will require different types of evidence and different presentations of that evidence than a public lecture or practitioner journal.

Reflexivity and Questionnaires

Questionnaires, as we began by saying, represent the very best of social research, but also potentially the worst. One problem that I think is particularly worth thinking about is how particular instruments can become ingrained as an adequate or good tool in a research area, and so become used without thought within it.

It is surely important, even if there is a generally accepted tool within a particular research area, for it to be used in a careful way. Using an established tool has a number of advantages – it produces straightforward comparisons with previous work, it avoids the need for a new form to be designed, and so can mean that new research is both quicker and cheaper than it would otherwise have been. However, it can also lead to particular tools being used without any particular justification other than the fact that they have already been used. The argument of this book is that research methods need to have a logic of appropriateness, and the thoughtless use of any kind of research tool or method isn't a good move. Being reflexive about methods means thinking about their usage in each new research project and each new design. If social research is going to be taken seriously, then social researchers need to use methods and tools not because they have been used before, but because they are fit for the task at hand.

Contentious Issues

There are still a few more difficult issues that social researchers doing questionnaires need to consider. These issues will not always arise, but having a view on them will lead to more informed decisions being taken when they do.

Sampling and Sample Sizes

Issues of sampling and sample sizes vary considerably between academic disciplines. Chapter 4 deals in more depth with sampling, but again, what I want to stress at this point is that the sampling method chosen for a project is appropriate to the goals of the research. Assuming that a random sample is the only way of conducting research is going to mean a great deal of research that could be done in environments where this simply isn't possible, won't be done. Equally, assuming that, to be valid, sample sizes have to be big isn't a good starting point. What researchers need to do is to work out what kind of claims they want to make about their questionnaire results, what kind of data they are trying to collect using them, and make sure that the claims they can make from it are defendable and appropriate. Quantitative and qualitative research designs might require very different sampling strategies. There are no automatically right answers.

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Response Rates

A related question to the one above concerns what response rate is required for a result to be valid. Again, the matter requires thought and care. Ideally, researchers need to be able to show that the group that has responded to a questionnaire has the characteristics required by the study. A quantitative measure of this might be whether the response group is representative of the sample chosen (in the sense of being a stratified sample of it) with, of course, the sample itself being representative of the population. If particular characteristics are missing from the respondent group compared to those of the sample, then there is a problem, and further, targeted questionnaire distribution might be necessary to try and address this.

If researchers can show that their response group is representative of their sample, and that their sampling method was reliable, then they have a good footing for arguing that their results too are reliable. The important thing is for researchers to think about what kind of a case they need to make in order to make that claim – what are the norms within their discipline, and what are the norms within their research area?

Anonymity

Last, there is perhaps the most thorny issue of all – anonymity. It is common sense in many disciplines for questionnaires to be conducted anonymously. The arguments in favour of this can be put under the headings of anonymity being both practical and ethical. The practical argument is that offering anonymity will lead to respondents being more honest, and feeling that they can say what they believe without being concerned whether their answers will in some way be used against them. The ethical argument is that respondents should have assurances that participating in research will have no adverse consequences for them, that their responses can result in no subsequent harm and that they have a right to anonymity generally.

What possible arguments are there against these points? In many respects, they do appear to be common sense. However, objections can be made against them.

In terms of the practical arguments, it is also the case that anonymity can lead to less honesty in research participants rather than more. Again, the work of Ariely (2008) has shown that people taking part in research can behave in remarkably dishonest ways when the assurance of anonymity is in place. Research participants have been shown to be more likely to steal and to lie about test results they have taken, for example, when they believe they are anonymous. The idea that anonymity leads to greater honesty is a proposition that needs a great deal more testing before it can be regarded as common sense.

The ethical argument for anonymity is a strong one, not least because it is backed by many research codes of conduct (see Chapter 9) and so requires a strong counter-argument for it not to be a standard part of research design. Again, though, there are possible objections. One situation where anonymity becomes problematic is where respondents use their anonymity to make racist, sexist or even illegal statements. We can take the view that this is a part of everyday life, and so we should turn a blind eye, or ask the question

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at what point the ethical idea of confidentiality might be trumped by these other considerations. If, in a student questionnaire, some respondents make comments about lecturing staff that can be fairly regarded as indecent, are these grounds for breaching confidentiality and asking those students to account for their behaviour? If in a questionnaire it becomes apparent that particular respondents have knowledge about unsolved crime, or have the intention to commit crime, is that consideration more important than anonymity? If a group of politicians fill in questionnaires and some of them divulge information that makes them, by the law of that country, unfit to hold office, would that mean that their anonymity should still be retained?

Again, these questions do not have easy answers. Researchers need to be thinking about the issues that they raise, however, and to be able to provide an explanation of the choices that they make when difficult issues arise in their own work. Codes of conduct provide answers to problems such as anonymity that can help us with ethical dilemmas, but not necessarily give defendable answers.

Conclusion – Working with the Good and Bad of Questionnaires

Questionnaires are deservedly a popular and effective way of conducting research. However, they must be chosen for the right reasons, based on them being the most appropriate tool for the research problem to be addressed, and temptations to use ‘off the peg’ instruments should be resisted unless those designs can be shown to be the best for the research job in hand.

Different perspectives can be taken on research design that lead to them having very different roles within a research design, or perhaps even ruling them out completely. It is important researchers understand why they are using a questionnaire, how it fits with other method choices they are making, and what they are seeking to claim by collecting questionnaire data.

Questionnaires are deceptive in that they can be designed quickly, but are just about impossible to get perfect. An almost overwhelming range of difficulties present themselves very quickly, most of which boil down to the problem that in many other forms of research, interactions with participants allow confusions and mistakes to be clarified, whereas with questionnaires you may get just one attempt to get that person to respond to your questions. Any ambiguities, leading questions or errors in sequencing or presenting questions will be there for all those who participate, and it may not be possible (or desirable), where a mistake happens, to get your respondents to fill in a corrected questionnaire.

Questionnaires also raise difficult issues around sampling, response rates and anonymity, the first two of which will be a part of any study, the last arises only occasionally. However, these issues highlight the concern that, because questionnaires can be done so quickly, a magic formula can be found to address all the research issues likely to arise. Where research is done without thought, it is less likely to be good research.

Five Things to Remember About This Chapter

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1. Questionnaires are popular because they are a relatively cheap and efficient way of gathering a lot of data quickly.
2. Questionnaire design carries with it a series of assumptions; questionnaires that have lots of closed-response questions based on scales are very different philosophically from those that ask open questions asking respondents to answer in their own words.
3. Getting questions right is extremely important – unlike interviews you won't get a chance to elaborate or clarify if your question is ambiguous or misleading.
4. You need to pay attention not only to the wording of individual questions but also to the sequence in which they appear if you are to avoid leading your respondents to particular answers.
5. What is an acceptable response rate and sampling system varies according to the type of research you are carrying out. You need to find out norms for each in the respective field if you want to publish your work there, or to make a successful grant proposal.

Example – *The Paradox of Choice*

Barry Schwartz's book *The Paradox of Choice* (2004) illustrates both the pitfalls and importance of questionnaires. Schwartz explores research, examining the extent to which the public want to be able to exercise choice in healthcare systems when they fall ill. This is an important area because a great deal of health policy in both the US and UK seems to explicitly presume that people want to choose where and how they are treated when sick.

What Schwartz's work suggests is, when asked prospectively (or before they are actually sick), the overwhelming majority of people say that they would want to be able to make choices should they fall ill. This is exactly what governments want us to do – to drive improvements in healthcare systems by choosing the providers of care who are the most responsive, or who have the best records in treating patients, so that standards are driven up for everyone as a result. This part of the work Schwartz describes fits exactly with the way we have been reforming our healthcare systems.

However, there is an additional part to the research. When asked whether they would like choice when they actually fall ill, especially with a serious condition such as cancer, the overwhelming majority of people say they *do not* want a choice.

So, it turns out, the important thing about survey work in this area is to make sure that you ask not only the right questions, in the right sequence, but also *at the right time.* There is little point in giving people choices they may express they want when they are healthy,

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if, at the time they actually have to make those choices, they no longer wish to. Only by having a research process that captures these differences can we get a sensible picture of how patient choice can (or cannot) work in health reform.

Does this mean that choice-based reforms of healthcare are taking us in the wrong direction? Not entirely. Schwartz's research makes us ask important questions about whether we want more choice in all aspects of our lives. But at the same time, coming to the conclusion that choice in healthcare is a bad idea are premature (and not the central thrust of Schwartz's book). There are situations where we can be genuinely empowered by having choices about our care – patients with chronic diseases, such as multiple sclerosis or cystic fibrosis, often develop high levels of expertise about them, but also about their own bodies' responses to the treatments available. In these circumstances they can become genuine experts in their own right, and so are probably better able to make choices about their treatment than many of the clinicians they come into contact with.

In other words, it isn't that we don't want, or can't make, choices about healthcare – it is that different conditions and different people need healthcare systems to support them in different ways, and presuming either that we all want choice, or that none of us want it, are equally unlikely. You probably know people who arm themselves with printouts of diagnosis and treatment information from the internet before going to see a doctor, and they clearly will demand a wider range of choices than those of us who take the view that we ought to ask our doctors what they think is wrong with us first. We should probably be suspicious of any research finding that suggests it is possible to generalise sufficiently to take into account such a wide range of views.

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