SO5041 Unit 14: Surveys and Questionnaires

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Surveys and Questionnaires

Surveys and Questionnaires

- The main way of collecting survey data is by means of questionnaires and structured interviews
- There are several important issues relating to the design and implementation of questionnaire-based surveys
- Reading:
  - Bryman Chs 9 and 10
  - DA de Vaus, *Surveys in Social Research*, chapter 6 ("Constructing Questionnaires")

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Questionnaires

- The questionnaire is the backbone – the script for the interview
- Two main types
    - In structured interviewing it is sometimes referred to as the interview schedule
    - Questionnaires filled out by the respondent him/herself are referred

    to as self-completion questionnaires
- The practical purpose of a questionnaire survey is to get standard info from a large number of people relatively cheaply and reliably

Purpose of questionnaire

- Must minimise of ambiguity in the meaning of the recorded answers – need to be clear and precise
- Also minimise non-response
    - Item non-response: refusal to answer or "don't know" to specific questions
    - Respondent refusal: flat refusal to participate
- Hence good design is important:
    - Clarity of questions and structure
    - No unnecessary burden on the respondent

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Questionnaire Design

- There are two aspects to questionnaire design
  - The overall structure of the document
  - The individual questions

Composing questions

- Questions must be clear and unambiguous
    - Express the questions in clear and simple language
    - Don't use leading questions (Avoid "Isn't it the case that X is a good idea?"; prefer "Do you think X is a good idea or a bad idea?")
    - Ask a single thing at a time (Avoid "Do you have a job, and if so how much do you earn?")

- Avoid hypothetical questions: often don't give useful information (e.g., "If you had a grant how much more money would you spend on drink?")
- If you need to ask for information about others, restrict it to factual information ("What is your partner's job?", but not "What does your partner think about X?")

- Make the questions easy to answer:
    - provide a set of options (perhaps on a prompt card)
    - with amounts (time, money etc.) provide options help to precision (e.g., times per week, ranges)

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Document structure

- The document must be structured simply and logically
  - Group questions in a way that will seem reasonable to the respondent
  - Use clear routing:

  > 5: Do you have a job?
  >
  > (if yes, ask qn 6, else skip to qn 7)
  >
  > 6: What is your job?
  >
  > 7: ...

- Reserve sensitive questions (e.g., income, drug use) to the end of the questionnaire: less likely to scare off respondents there

Question structure

- The structure of questions is also important
- Each question must have its answer space: a tick-box, a space for writing, a set of categories
- Closed questions are preferred: a fixed set of options makes it easier to answer and to analyse
- Always allow the category "Other" with closed questions, with space to write ("If other, please specify:")

Types of closed question

- Closed responses can take several forms:
    - One only: "Tick the category that best describes your job"
    - One or more: "Tick all of the following reasons that are relevant"
    - Ranking: "Rank the importance for you of each of the following reasons (1, 2, 3 etc.)"

Likert scales

- Measurement of attitudes often uses "Likert" scales:
    - a set of statements relevant to the attitude being measured
    - with options indicating agreement:
        - Strongly disagree
        - Disagree
        - Neither agree nor disagree
        - Agree
        - Strongly agree

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- The practical organisation of the questionnaire must take question structure into account: easy to answer and easy to process
- Processing involves several steps
  - Recording the information as it is being collected
  - Checking it is consistent and the right questions are answered
  - Coding it onto a computer
  - Checking it is consistent once on computer
  - Adding variable and value labels to help the computer data set to make sense

- The design of the questionnaire should keep the first three of these in mind
    - It should be easy to record the information
    - It should be easy to read the recorded information to see that it makes sense, to see that the correct routing has been followed
    - The layout of the questionnaire should anticipate the structure of the computer data set

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Example Questionnaire Extract

1: Sex: Male ☐₁ Female ☐₂

2: Age: 18 or under ☐₁
    19 – 23 ☐₂
    24 – 30 ☐₃
    31 – 40 ☐₄
    41 – 50 ☐₅
    51 – 64 ☐₆
    65 or more ☐₇

Office use only

☐q1

☐q2

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3: Which of the following options best describes your current situation? (show card):

Self-employed	☐ 1	☐ q3
Employed	☐ 2	
Unemployed	☐ 3	
Retired	☐ 4	
Family care	☐ 6	
Full time student, school	☐ 7	
Long-term sick, disabled	☐ 8	
Training scheme	☐ 9	
Other	☐ 10	

If "Other" please specify:

Ordinal options (with a flaw)

4: How often do you read newspapers? Tick the category that is closest:

Never ⬜₁ (Skip to question 6) ⬜q4
More than 1 per day ⬜₂
1 every day ⬜₃
2–4 per week ⬜₄
1 per week ⬜₅
Less than 1 per week ⬜₆

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Picking zero or more from a list

5: Which of the following newspapers do you read? (show card) Tick each one that applies:

Newspaper		
Irish Times	☐ a	☐ q5a
Irish Independent	☐ b	☐ q5b
Irish Examiner	☐ c	☐ q5c
Limerick Leader	☐ d	☐ q5d
Sunday Independent	☐ e	☐ q5e
etc. etc.	☐ f	☐ q5f
Other	☐ g	☐ q5g

If "Other" please specify:

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6: People have different views about women's role in society. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of the following things people might say, using the categories provided:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
A woman's place is in the home	☐1	☐2	☐3	☐4	☐5	☐q6a
Young children suffer if the mother works outside the home	☐1	☐2	☐3	☐4	☐5	☐q6b
Women are entitled to the same pay for the same work as men	☐1	☐2	☐3	☐4	☐5	☐q6c
When a wife works it is important for the husband to do his share of the housework	☐1	☐2	☐3	☐4	☐5	☐q6d

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Pilot your questionnaire

- It is very important that a questionnaire work well once in the field
- Test it beforehand,
    - on friends/colleagues
    - on a "pilot" subsample drawn from the reference population
- Are the questions comprehensible?
- Are the categories in closed questions adequate? Do they cover everything? Make the right distinctions? No very unlikely ones? Will they make sense to the respondent?

Piloting

- Is the structure okay? Not too complicated or illogical?
- Is there anything likely to confuse the respondent or interviewer?
- Exactly how long will it take? If too long, shorten it now!
- Piloting will also allow you to create closed categories for questions, using real-world feedback rather than your imagination

https://teaching.sociology.ul.ie/apps/so4046/survey/