

SURVEY RESEARCH: QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN – ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

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FORMAT

- **Recall questions**
- **Threatening Questions**
- **Socially Desirable questions**
- **Knowledge Questions**
- **Skip/Contingency questions**
- **Non-attitudes & the middle position (Filtering questions)**
- **Floater**
- **Agree/Disagree Ranking/Rating**
- **Wording Issue**
- **Length of Questionnaire**
- **Order Effect & Context Effect**
- **Format & Layout**
- **Non-response**

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RESPONDENT RECALL

- Recalling events accurately takes more time and effort than the five seconds that respondents have to answer survey questions.
- One's ability to recall accurately declines over time.
- Memory is affected by many factors –
 - The topic,
 - Events occurring simultaneously and subsequently,
 - The significance of an event for a person, situational conditions (question wording and interview style), and
 - The respondent's need to have internal consistency

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CONT'D...

- Provide respondents with special instructions and extra thinking time.
- Also provide aids to respondent recall, such as a fixed time frame or location references.
 - E.G., . Instead of asking: **"how often did you attend a sporting event last winter?"** Better to ask:
"I want to know how many sporting events you attended last winter. Let's go month by month. Think back to December. Did you attend any sporting events for which you paid admission in December?"

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THREATENING QUESTIONS

- Respondents may be reluctant to answer the sensitive questions or to answer completely and truthfully.

For example questions regarding:

- Personal relationships
- Drugs or alcohol use
- Mental health problems
- Deviant behavior.
- Sexual behavior

Respondents often (1) try to present a positive image of themselves to others; (2) may be ashamed, embarrassed, or afraid to give truthful answers or find it emotionally painful to express/confront their own actions honestly.

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THREATENING QUESTIONS ... CONT'D...

- **People UNDERREPORT** ... (1) having an illness or disability (Cancer, mental illness etc.); (2) engaging in illegal or deviant behavior (Evading taxes, taking drugs, consuming alcohol), or revealing their financial status (Income, savings, debts)
- **People OVER-REPORT** ... positive behaviors or generally accepted beliefs.

To increase probability of truthful response:

- **Carefully word** the questions.
- Ask threatening question **after** a warm-up (in face to face situation)
- Develop **rapport** and **trust** with the respondents
- Put a threatening response within more serious activities to make it seem less deviant.
- E.G., *Respondents might hesitate to admit shoplifting if it is asked first, but after being asked about armed robbery or burglary, they may admit to shoplifting because it appears less serious.*

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SOCIALLY DESIRABLE QUESTIONS

- Some questions may create *social desirability bias*, i.E., “Respondents distort answer to make their reports conform to social norms”
- People tend to over-report being *cultured* (i.E. Reading, attending high-culture events), *giving charity*, *having a good marriage* etc.

Tactics

Try to reduce social desirability bias by:

- Phrasing questions in ways that make norms-violation appear less objectionable and that presents a wider range of behavior as acceptable.
- Offer multiple response categories that give respondents "face-saving" alternative.

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KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS

- Questions about knowledge regarding an issue or topic can be threatening:
 - No body wants to **appear/seen ignorant!**
 - Respondents may have reservations about an issue. E.G., Individual opposing PM of pakistan may know many facts about him, but for political reasons may show ignorance.
- Surveys may measure opinions better if they first ask about factual information, because many people have inaccurate factual knowledge.
- Knowledge-related questions can be made relatively easy by carefully wording them & putting aids/helpers such as “**how much, if anything, have you heard about...?**”

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SKIP OR CONTINGENCY QUESTIONS (A.K.A: SCREENING QUESTIONS)

- “A contingency question is a two- (or more) part question. The answer to the first part of the question determines which of two different questions a respondent next receives.”
- Sometimes some questions are relevant for specific types of respondents.
- Contingency questions select respondents for whom a second question is relevant.

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EXAMPLE OF CONTINGENCY QUESTION

1. Were you born in Australia?
 Yes (GO TO QUESTION 2)
 No _____
 (a) What country were you born in? _____
 (b) How many years have you lived in Australia? _____
 (c) Are you an Australian citizen?
 Yes No
 NOW GO TO QUESTION 2

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NON-ATTITUDES AND THE MIDDLE POSITIONS

- Survey researchers debate whether to include choices for neutral, middle, and non-attitudes (e.G., 'Not sure' "don't know" or "no opinion").
- Two types of errors can be made:
 - Accepting a middle choice or "no attitude" response when respondents hold a non-neutral opinion, **or**
 - Forcing respondents to choose a position on an issue when they have no opinion about it.

Fear is that Respondents will choose non-attitude choices to evade making a choice.

However,

- it is usually best to offer a non-attitude choice, because people will express opinions on fictitious issues, objects, and events. By offering a non-attitude (middle or no opinion) choice, researchers identify those holding middle positions or those without opinions.
- Non-attitudes can be approached by distinguishing among three kinds of attitude questions: **standard-format**, **quasi-filter**, and **full-filter** questions.

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CONT'D...

- THE **STANDARD-FORMAT QUESTION** DOES NOT OFFER A "DON'T KNOW" CHOICE; A RESPONDENT MUST VOLUNTEER IT.

A STANDARD FORMAT QUESTION

Here is a question about another country. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? "The Russian leaders are basically trying to get along with America."

- A **QUASI-FILTER QUESTION** OFFERS RESPONDENTS A "DON'T KNOW" ALTERNATIVE.

QUASI-FILTER QUESTION

Here is a statement about another country: "The Russian leaders are basically trying to get along with America." Do you agree, disagree, or have no opinion on that?

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CONT'D...

- A FULL-FILTER QUESTION IS A SPECIAL TYPE OF CONTINGENCY QUESTION. IT FIRST ASKS IF RESPONDENTS HAVE AN OPINION, THEN ASKS FOR THE OPINION OF THOSE WHO STATE THAT THEY DO HAVE AN OPINION.

FULL FILTER QUESTIONS

Here is a statement about another country. Not everyone has an opinion on this. If you do not have an opinion, just say so. Here's the statement: "The Russian leaders are basically trying to get along with America." Do you have an opinion on that? If yes, do you agree or disagree.

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FLOATERS

- Many respondents will answer a question if a "no opinion" choice is missing, but they will choose "don't know" when it is offered or say that they do not have an opinion if asked. Such respondents are called **floaters**
 - Because they "float" from giving a response to not knowing.
 - Their responses are affected by minor wording changes, so researchers screen them out using quasi-filter or full-filter questions.
 - Filtered questions do not eliminate all answers to non-existent issues, but they reduce the problem.

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AGREE, DISAGREE, RANKINGS OR RATINGS?

- Survey researchers who measure values and attitudes have debated two issues about the responses offered.
 - 1) should questionnaire items make a statement and ask respondents whether they agree or disagree with it, or should it offer respondents specific alternatives?
 - Should the questionnaire include a set of items and ask respondents to rate them (Approve, disapprove), or
 - 2) should it give them a list of items and force them to rank order items (From most favored to least favored)?

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AGREE, DISAGREE, RANKINGS OR RATINGS?

- It is best to offer respondents explicit alternatives. E.G.,
 - Instead of asking, "do you agree or disagree with the statement, 'men are better suited to. . .'" Instead
 - Ask, "do you think men are better suited, women are better suited, or both are equally suited?"
- Less educated respondents are more likely to agree with a statement.
- Whereas forced-choice alternatives encourage thought and avoid the response set bias - a tendency of some respondents to agree and not really decide.

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CONT'D...

- Researchers create bias if question wording gives respondents a reason for choosing one alternative.
 - i.e., Situations involving assessment of alternatives it is best to **“rank”** instead of **asking respondents to “rate”**
- Respondents can rate several items equally high but will place them in a hierarchy if asked to rank them.

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WORDING ISSUES

- 1) the use simple vocabulary and grammar to minimize confusion.
- 2) wording also involves effects of specific words or phrases.
 - This is trickier because it is not possible to know in advance whether a word or phrase affects responses.
- The well-documented difference between forbid and not allow illustrates the problem of wording differences.
 - Both terms have the same meaning, but many more people are willing to "not allow" something than to "forbid" it.
- Usually, less educated respondents are most influenced by minor wording differences. Certain words seem to trigger an emotional reaction, and researchers are just beginning to learn of them!

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LENGTH OF SURVEY OR QUESTIONNAIRE

- There is no absolute proper length.
- The length depends on the survey format (i.e., Face-to-face, telephonic, mailed etc.) And on the respondents' characteristics.
 - A telephone interview could last from 5 minutes to 20 minutes (but depends at least on the topic of the survey as well as the interviewing skills)
 - In mail survey, A 3-4 pages long questionnaire is appropriate for the general population. Some researchers have had success with questionnaires as long as 10 page. For longer questionnaires. For highly educated respondents and a salient topic, using questionnaires of 15 pages may be possible.
 - Face-to-face interviews lasting an hour are common.

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QUESTION ORDER OR SEQUENCE.

a survey researcher faces three question sequence issues:

1.1 Organisation of Questionnaire: in general, sequence questions to minimize the discomfort and confusion of respondents.

- a questionnaire has opening, middle, and ending questions.
- after an introduction explaining the survey, it is best to make opening questions pleasant, interesting, and easy to answer to help a respondent feel comfortable about the questionnaire.
- avoid asking many boring background questions or threatening questions first.
- organize questions into common topics.
- mixing questions on different topics causes confusion. orient respondents by placing questions on the same topic together and introduce the section with a short introductory statement
- do not end with highly threatening questions, and always end with a "thank you."

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1.2 QUESTION ORDER OR SEQUENCE: ORDER EFFECTS!

- The order in which they present questions may influence respondent answers.
 - **"Order effects"** appear to be strongest for people who lack strong views, for less educated respondents, and for older respondents or those with memory loss.

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1.3 QUESTION ORDER OR SEQUENCE CONTEXT EFFECT

Two things can be done regarding context effects:

- Use a funnel sequence of questions—that is, ask more general questions before specific ones (e.g., Ask about health in general before asking about specific diseases). **Or**
- (At piloting phase) divide the number of respondents in half and give half of the questions in one order and the other half in the alternative order. Then examine the results to see whether question order mattered.
- If question order effects are found, which order tells you what the respondents really think? The answer is that you cannot know for sure.
- Respondents answer all questions based on a context of preceding questions and the interview setting. Remember,
- The more ambiguous a question's meaning, the stronger the context effects, because respondents will draw on the context to interpret and understand the question.

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FORMAT AND LAYOUT.

- There are two format or layout issues:
 - The overall physical layout of the questionnaire &
 - The format of questions and response.

Questionnaire layout

- Questionnaires should be clear, neat, and easy to follow.
- Give each question a number and put identifying information (e.g., Name of organization) on questionnaires.
- Never cramp questions together or create a confusing appearance.
- Make a cover sheet or face sheet for each interview, for administrative use.
- Put the time and date of interview, the interviewer, the respondent identification number, and the interviewer's comments and observations on it.
- A professional appearance with high-quality graphics, space between questions, and good layout improves accuracy and completeness and helps the questionnaire flow.

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QUESTIONNAIRE LAYOUT...

- Give interviewers/respondents instructions on the questionnaire.
- Print instructions in a different style from the questions (e.g., In a different color or font or in all capitals) to distinguish them.
- Layout is crucial for mail questionnaires because there is no interviewer to interact with the respondent.
- Instead, the questionnaire's appearance persuades the respondent.
- Include a polite, professional cover letter on letterhead identifying the researcher and offering a telephone number for questions.
- Always end with "thank you for your participation."
- Interviewers and questionnaires should leave respondents with a positive feeling about the survey and a sense that their participation is appreciated. Question design matters.

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QUESTION FORMAT.

- Survey researchers decide on a format for questions and responses.
 - Should respondents circle responses, check boxes, fill in dots, or put an x in a blank?
- Principally, make responses unambiguous.
- Also, listing responses down a page rather than across makes them easier to see.
- Use arrows and instructions for contingency questions.
- Visual aids are also helpful. E.g., Hand out thermometer-like drawings to respondents when asking about how warm or cool they feel toward someone.
- A matrix question (or grid question) is a compact way to present a series of questions using the same response categories. It saves space and makes it easier for the respondent or interviewer to note answers for the same response categories.

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NON-RESPONSE

- The failure to get a valid response from every sampled respondent weakens a survey.
- Non-response can be a major problem for survey research because if a high proportion of the sampled respondents do not respond, researchers may not be able to generalize results, especially if those who do not respond differ from those who respond.
- You can improve eligibility rates by:
 - Careful respondent screening,
 - Better sample frame definition, and
 - Multilingual interviewers.

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NON-RESPONSE

- You can decrease refusals by
 - Sending letters in advance of an interview,
 - Offering to reschedule interviews,
 - Using small incentives (i.e., Small gifts),
 - Adjusting interviewer behavior and statements (i.e., Making eye contact, expressing sincerity, explaining the sampling or survey, emphasizing importance of the interview, clarifying promises of confidentiality, etc.).
- You can also use alternative interviewers (i.e., Different demographic characteristics, age, race, gender, or ethnicity)

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