

SURVEY RESEARCH: QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

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FORMAT

- PRINCIPLES OF QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

CONSTRUCTING THE QUESTIONNAIRE: PRINCIPLES OF GOOD QUESTION WRITING

REMEMBER AT LEAST THREE TIPS

- KEEP QUESTIONNAIRE CLEAR,
- KEEP QUESTIONNAIRE SIMPLE, &
- KEEP RESPONDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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1. AVOID JARGON, SLANG & ABBREVIATION

- **AVOID JARGON**
 - *THE LANGUAGE, ESPECIALLY THE VOCABULARY, PECULIAR TO A PARTICULAR TRADE, PROFESSION, OR GROUP.*
 - E.G. SOCIOLOGIST TALK ABOUT **ANOMIE**, PSYCHOLOGISTS TALK ABOUT THE **OEDIPUS COMPLEX**.
- **AVOID SLANG** (UNLESS A SPECIALIZED POPULATION IS BEING SURVEYED).
 - *VERY INFORMAL USAGE IN VOCABULARY AND IDIOM THAT IS CHARACTERISTICALLY MORE METAPHORICAL, PLAYFUL, VIVID THAN ORDINARY LANGUAGE.*
 - FOR EXAMPLE, THE HOMELESS TALK ABOUT A SNOWBIRD AND SKIERS ABOUT A HOTDOG.
- **AVOID ABBREVIATIONS.** E.G., NATO , SAARC, UOP, ISSG, USEFP.
- TARGET THE VOCABULARY AND GRAMMAR TO THE RESPONDENTS SAMPLE.

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2. AVOID AMBIGUITY, CONFUSION, AND VAGUENESS

- DON'T ASSUME THAT RESPONDENTS KNOW THE INTENTION BEHIND YOUR QUESTION
- E.G., THE QUESTION, "**WHAT IS YOUR INCOME?**" COULD MEAN
 - WEEKLY, MONTHLY, OR ANNUAL;
 - FAMILY OR PERSONAL;
 - BEFORE TAXES OR AFTER TAXES;
 - FOR THIS YEAR OR LAST YEAR;
 - FROM SALARY OR FROM ALL SOURCES.

THE CONFUSION CAUSES INCONSISTENCIES IN HOW DIFFERENT RESPONDENTS ASSIGN MEANING TO AND ANSWER THE QUESTION.

THE RESEARCHER WHO WANTS BEFORE-TAX ANNUAL FAMILY INCOME FOR LAST YEAR MUST EXPLICITLY ASK FOR IT.

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CONT'D...

- DON'T USE INDEFINITE WORDS OR RESPONSE CATEGORIES.
- E.G., QUESTION:
 - "DO YOU JOG REGULARLY?"
 - (1) YES___ (2) NO___".
- **REGULARLY** MAY BE INTERPRETED AS
 - EVERYDAY,
 - ONCE A WEEK.

TO REDUCE RESPONDENTS' CONFUSION AND GET ACCURATE INFORMATION:

- ASK WHETHER A PERSON JOGS
 - "ABOUT ONCE A DAY
 - ONCE A WEEK

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3. AVOID EMOTIONAL LANGUAGE

- **USE NEUTRAL LANGUAGE.**

- WORDS WITH STRONG EMOTIONAL CONNOTATIONS CAN COLOR HOW RESPONDENTS HEAR AND ANSWER SURVEY QUESTIONS
- RESPONDENTS MAY REACT TO THE EMOTIONAL WORDS RATHER THAN TO THE ISSUE.
- E.G., THE QUESTION,
 - WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT A POLICY TO ALLOW IMMORAL AND UNETHICAL POLITICIANS WHO THREATEN TO STEAL THE FREEDOMS OF PEACE-LOVING PEOPLE?
- IS FULL OF EMOTIONAL WORDS (MURDEROUS, FREEDOMS, STEAL, AND PEACE).

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4. AVOID PRESTIGE BIAS

- ISSUES LINKED TO PEOPLE WITH HIGH SOCIAL STATUS CAN COLOR HOW RESPONDENTS HEAR AND ANSWER SURVEY QUESTIONS.
 - TITLES OR POSITIONS IN SOCIETY (E.G., PRESIDENT, EXPERT, ETC.) CARRY PRESTIGE OR STATUS.
 - AVOID ASSOCIATING A STATEMENT WITH A PRESTIGIOUS PERSON OR GROUP.
 - RESPONDENTS MAY ANSWER ON THE BASIS OF THEIR FEELINGS TOWARD THE PERSON OR GROUP RATHER THAN ADDRESSING THE ISSUE. E.G.,
 - MOST DOCTORS SAY THAT CIGARETTE SMOKE CAUSES LUNG DISEASE FOR THOSE NEAR A SMOKER. DO YOU AGREE?
 - DO YOU SUPPORT THE PRIME MINISTERS POLICY REGARDING AFGHANISTAN?
- MIGHT BE ANSWERED BY RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD OF **LUNG CANCER** OR **KASHMIR** ON THE BASIS OF THEIR VIEW OF THE DOCTORS/PRIME MINISTER.

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5. AVOID DOUBLE-BARRELED QUESTIONS.

- "A DOUBLE-BARRELED QUESTION CONSISTS OF TWO OR MORE QUESTIONS JOINED TOGETHER."
- IT MAKES A RESPONDENT'S ANSWER AMBIGUOUS. E.G.,
 - "DOES THIS COMPANY HAVE PENSION AND HEALTH INSURANCE BENEFITS?"
 - THE RESPONSE HAS AN AMBIGUOUS MEANING, AND THE RESEARCHER CANNOT BE CERTAIN OF THE RESPONDENT'S INTENTION.
- A RESEARCHER WHO WANTS TO ASK ABOUT THE JOINT OCCURRENCE OF TWO THINGS, E.G., A COMPANY WITH BOTH HEALTH INSURANCE AND PENSION BENEFITS-SHOULD ASK TWO SEPARATE QUESTIONS.
- **MAKE EACH QUESTION ABOUT ONE AND ONLY ONE TOPIC.**

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6. DO NOT CONFUSE BELIEFS WITH REALITY.

- DO NOT CONFUSE WHAT A RESPONDENT BELIEVES WITH WHAT YOU, THE RESEARCHER, MEASURES. E.G.,
 - A RESEARCHER WANTS TO FIND OUT IF STUDENTS RATE TEACHERS HIGHER WHO TELL MANY JOKES IN CLASS. THE TWO VARIABLES ARE "TEACHER TELLS JOKES" AND "RATING THE TEACHER." THE WRONG WAY TO APPROACH THE ISSUE IS TO ASK STUDENTS,
 - **"DO YOU RATE A TEACHER HIGHER IF THE TEACHER TELLS MANY JOKES?"**
 - THIS MEASURES WHETHER OR NOT STUDENTS BELIEVE THAT THEY RATE TEACHERS BASED ON JOKE TELLING; IT DOES NOT MEASURE THE EMPIRICAL RELATIONSHIP.
 - THE CORRECT WAY IS TO ASK TWO SEPARATE EMPIRICALLY BASED QUESTIONS: "HOW DO YOU RATE THIS TEACHER?" AND "HOW MANY JOKES DOES THE TEACHER TELL IN CLASS?"

THEN THE RESEARCHER CAN EXAMINE ANSWERS TO THE TWO QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE IF THERE IS AN ASSOCIATION BETWEEN THEM.

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7. AVOID LEADING (OR LOADED) QUESTIONS

A LEADING (OR LOADED) QUESTION IS ONE THAT LEADS THE RESPONDENT TO CHOOSE ONE RESPONSE OVER ANOTHER BY ITS WORDING.

- MAKE RESPONDENTS FEEL THAT ALL RESPONSES ARE LEGITIMATE.
- DO NOT LET THEM BECOME AWARE OF AN ANSWER THAT THE RESEARCHER WANTS. E.G., THE QUESTION:
 - **YOU DON'T SMOKE, DO YOU?**
 - LEADS RESPONDENTS TO STATE THAT THEY DO NOT SMOKE .
- LOADED QUESTIONS CAN BE STATED TO GET EITHER **POSITIVE** OR **NEGATIVE** ANSWERS. E.G.,
 - SHOULD CHIEF MINISTER SPEND EVEN MORE LOANS ON BRT?

VS

 - SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT FIX THE POLLUTING AND HAPHAZARD TRANSPORT SYSTEM IN PESHAWAR?

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8. AVOID ASKING QUESTIONS THAT ARE BEYOND RESPONDENTS' CAPABILITIES

- ASKING SOMETHING THAT FEW RESPONDENTS KNOW FRUSTRATES RESPONDENTS AND PRODUCES POOR-QUALITY RESPONSES. RESPONDENTS CANNOT ALWAYS RECALL PAST DETAILS AND MAY NOT KNOW SPECIFIC FACTUAL INFORMATION.

FOR EXAMPLE, ASKING AN ADULT, "HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR BROTHER WHEN YOU WERE 6 YEARS OLD?"

- ASKING RESPONDENTS TO MAKE A CHOICE ABOUT SOMETHING THEY KNOW NOTHING ABOUT (E.G., A TECHNICAL ISSUE IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS OR AN INTERNAL POLICY OF AN ORGANIZATION) MAY RESULT IN AN ANSWER, BUT ONE THAT IS UNRELIABLE AND MEANINGLESS.
- WHEN MANY RESPONDENTS ARE UNLIKELY TO KNOW ABOUT AN ISSUE, USE A **FULL-FILTER QUESTION FORM**.
- FOR EXAMPLE, FEW RESPONDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO ANSWER, "HOW MANY GALLONS OF PETROLEUM DID YOU BUY LAST YEAR FOR YOUR CAR?" YET, RESPONDENTS MAY BE ABLE TO ANSWER A QUESTION: HOW MANY LITERS OF PETROLEUM DID YOU BUY FOR ONE-DAY LAST YEAR", WHICH THE RESEARCHER CAN MULTIPLY BY 365 TO ESTIMATE ANNUAL PURCHASE.

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9. AVOID FALSE PREMISES.

- DO NOT BEGIN A QUESTION WITH A PREMISE WITH WHICH RESPONDENTS MAY NOT AGREE, THEN ASK ABOUT CHOICES REGARDING IT.
- RESPONDENTS WHO DISAGREE WITH THE PREMISE WILL BE FRUSTRATED AND NOT KNOW HOW TO ANSWER.

FOR EXAMPLE, THE QUESTION, "THE POST OFFICE IS OPEN TOO MANY HOURS. DO YOU WANT IT TO OPEN FOUR HOURS LATER OR CLOSE FOUR HOURS EARLIER EACH DAY?"

... LEAVES THOSE WHO EITHER OPPOSE THE PREMISE OR OPPOSE BOTH ALTERNATIVES WITHOUT A MEANINGFUL CHOICE.

- A BETTER QUESTION EXPLICITLY ASKS THE RESPONDENT TO ASSUME A PREMISE IS TRUE, THEN ASKS FOR A PREFERENCE.

FOR EXAMPLE, "ASSUMING THE POST OFFICE HAS TO CUT BACK ITS OPERATING HOURS, WHICH WOULD YOU FIND MORE CONVENIENT, OPENING FOUR HOURS LATER OR CLOSING FOUR HOURS EARLIER EACH DAY?"

TRY TO AVOID QUESTIONS ON HYPOTHETICAL SITUATION (AS GIVEN ABOVE).

HOWEVER BEING EXPLICIT WILL REDUCE FRUSTRATION.

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10. AVOID ASKING ABOUT INTENTIONS IN THE DISTANT FUTURE.

- AVOID ASKING PEOPLE ABOUT WHAT THEY MIGHT DO UNDER HYPOTHETICAL CIRCUMSTANCES FAR IN THE FUTURE. RESPONSES ARE POOR PREDICTORS OF BEHAVIOR REMOVED FAR FROM THEIR CURRENT SITUATION OR FAR IN THE FUTURE. QUESTIONS SUCH AS, "SUPPOSE A NEW GROCERY STORE OPENED DOWN THE ROAD IN THREE YEARS. WOULD YOU SHOP AT IT?"

... ARE USUALLY A WASTE OF TIME.

- IT IS BETTER TO ASK ABOUT CURRENT OR RECENT ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR. IN GENERAL, RESPONDENTS ANSWER SPECIFIC, CONCRETE QUESTIONS THAT RELATE TO THEIR EXPERIENCES MORE RELIABLY THAN THEY DO THOSE ABOUT ABSTRACTIONS THAT ARE BEYOND THEIR IMMEDIATE EXPERIENCE.

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11. AVOID DOUBLE NEGATIVES.

- DOUBLE NEGATIVES IN ORDINARY LANGUAGE ARE GRAMMATICALLY INCORRECT AND CONFUSING.

FOR EXAMPLE, "I AIN'T GOT NO JOB" LOGICALLY MEANS THAT THE RESPONDENT DOES HAVE A JOB, BUT THE SECOND NEGATIVE IS USED IN THIS WAY FOR EMPHASIS.

- THEY ARISE WHEN RESPONDENTS ARE ASKED TO AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH A STATEMENT.

FOR EXAMPLE, RESPONDENTS WHO DISAGREE WITH THE STATEMENT, "STUDENTS SHOULD NOT BE REQUIRED TO TAKE A COMPREHENSIVE EXAM TO GRADUATE"

... ARE LOGICALLY STATING A DOUBLE NEGATIVE BECAUSE THEY DISAGREE WITH NOT DOING SOMETHING.

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12. AVOID OVERLAPPING OR UNBALANCED RESPONSE CATEGORIES.

- MAKE RESPONSE CATEGORIES OR CHOICES **12.1) MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE**, **12.2) EXHAUSTIVE**, AND **12.3) BALANCED**.
- **12.1 MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE** MEANS THAT RESPONSE CATEGORIES DO NOT OVERLAP. OVERLAPPING CATEGORIES THAT ARE NUMERICAL RANGES (E.G., YOUR AGE: **1)**10-15, **2)**15-20, **3)**20-25) CAN BE EASILY CORRECTED (E.G., **1)**11-15, **2)**16-20, **3)**21-25). THE AMBIGUOUS VERBAL CHOICE IS ANOTHER TYPE OF OVERLAPPING RESPONSE CATEGORY-

FOR EXAMPLE, "ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH YOUR JOB OR ARE THERE THINGS YOU DON'T LIKE ABOUT IT?"

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12.2. EXHAUSTIVE MEANS THAT EVERY RESPONDENT HAS A CHOICE – A PLACE TO GO.

FOR EXAMPLE, ASKING RESPONDENTS, "ARE YOU WORKING OR UNEMPLOYED?"

... LEAVES OUT RESPONDENTS WHO ARE NOT WORKING BUT DO NOT CONSIDER THEMSELVES UNEMPLOYED (E.G., FULL-TIME HOMEMAKERS, PEOPLE ON VACATION, STUDENTS, PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES, RETIRED PEOPLE, ETC.).

A RESEARCHER FIRST THINKS ABOUT WHAT HE OR SHE WANTS TO MEASURE AND THEN CONSIDERS THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF RESPONDENTS.

FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN ASKING ABOUT A RESPONDENT'S EMPLOYMENT, DOES THE RESEARCHER WANT INFORMATION ON THE PRIMARY JOB OR ON ALL JOBS? ON FULL-TIME WORK ONLY OR BOTH FULL- AND PART-TIME WORK? ON JOBS FOR PAY ONLY OR ON UNPAID OR VOLUNTEER JOBS AS WELL?

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12.3. KEEP RESPONSE CATEGORIES BALANCED.

- E.G., "WHAT KIND OF JOB IS THE NAIB NAZIM/NAZIM DOING: OUTSTANDING, EXCELLENT, VERY GOOD, OR SATISFACTORY?"

ANOTHER TYPE OF UNBALANCED QUESTION OMITTS INFORMATION-FOR EXAMPLE, "WHICH OF THE FIVE CANDIDATES RUNNING FOR NAIB NAZIM DO YOU FAVOR: MR. X OR ONE OF THE OTHERS?" RESEARCHERS CAN BALANCE RESPONSES BY OFFERING BIPOLAR OPPOSITES. IT IS EASY TO SEE THAT THE TERMS HONESTY AND DISHONESTY HAVE DIFFERENT MEANINGS AND CONNOTATIONS.

ASKING RESPONDENTS TO RATE WHETHER A MAYOR IS HIGHLY, SOMEWHAT, OR NOT VERY HONEST IS NOT THE SAME AS ASKING THEM TO RATE THE NAZIM/NAIB NAZIM'S LEVEL OF DISHONESTY.

UNLESS THERE IS A SPECIFIC PURPOSE FOR DOING OTHERWISE, IT IS BETTER TO OFFER RESPONDENTS EQUAL^A POLAR OPPOSITES AT EACH END OF A CONTINUUM.

... FOR EXAMPLE, "DO YOU THINK THE MAYOR IS: VERY HONEST, SOMEWHAT HONEST, NEITHER HONEST NOR DISHONEST, SOMEWHAT DISHONEST, OR VERY DISHONEST."

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SUMMARY OF SURVEY QUESTION WRITING PITFALLS

Things to avoid	Not Good	Possible Improvement
1. Jargon, slang, abbreviations	Did you drown in brew until you were totally blasted last night?	Last night, about how much beer did you drink?
2. Vagueness	Do you eat out often?	In a typical week, about how many meals do you eat away from home, at a restaurant, cafeteria, or other eating establishment?
3. Emotional language	"The respected Grace Commission documents that a staggering \$350 BILLION of our tax dollars are being completely wasted through poor procurement practices, bad management, sloppy book-keeping, 'defective' contract management, personnel abuses and other wasteful practices. Is cutting pork barrel spending and eliminating government waste a top priority for you?"	How important is it to you that Congress adopt measures to reduce government waste?
4. Prestige bias		Very Important Somewhat Important Neither Important or Unimportant Somewhat Unimportant Not Important At All
5. Double-barreled questions	Do you support or oppose raising social security benefits and increased spending for the military?	Do you support or oppose raising social security benefits? Do you support or oppose increasing spending on the military?

SUMMARY OF SURVEY QUESTION WRITING PITFALLS

Things to avoid	Not Good	Possible Improvement
6. Beliefs as real	Do you think more educated people smoke less?	What is your education level? Do you smoke cigarettes?
7. Leading questions	Did you do your patriotic duty and vote in the last election for mayor?	Did you vote in last month's mayoral election?
8. Issues beyond respondent capabilities	Two years ago, how many hours did you watch TV every month?	In the past two weeks, about how many hours do you think you watched TV on a typical day?
9. False premises	When did you stop beating your girl/boyfriend?	Have you ever slapped, punched, or hit your girl/boyfriend?
10. Distant future intentions	After you graduate from college, get a job, and are settled, will you invest a lot of money in the stock market?	Do you have definite plans to put some money into the stock market within the coming two months?
11. Double negatives	Do you disagree with those who do not want to build a new city swimming pool?	There is a proposal to build a new city swimming pool. Do you agree or disagree with the proposal?
12. Unbalanced responses	Did you find the service at our hotel to be, Outstanding, Excellent, Superior, or Good?	Please rate the service at our hotel: Outstanding, Very Good, Adequate, or Poor.

REFERENCES

- NEUMAN, W. L. (2013). *SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS: QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES (7TH ED.)*. PEARSON EDUCATION LIMITED: ESSEX.