Transcript

Chapter 11: How to design a suitable Survey

When designing quantitative research, the questionnaire or survey is the most likely tool students employ in most social science disciplines. Getting this right is crucial to the success of your project and requires you to put in a lot of thought. However, designing it appropriately will save you a lot of time in the long run.

There are three key parts to the process of designing questionnaire items in order to avoid running into problems.

So when developing your questionnaire, you need to be thinking about why you’re asking the question? What are you attempting to measure? and how you’re going to analyse the information? Then you need to undertake a process of piloting it. Finally, you need to adapt it and administer it accordingly.

If you get these things right you are likely to collect some really useful data.

So when thinking about why you are asking a question reflect on what you want to find out. Often the main reason that people struggle to analyse questionnaire material is because insufficient attention has been paid to the purpose of the question. All of the questions in a good questionnaire have a specific reason to be there. They should also relate to a clearly identifiable variable that will assist you to answer your research questions. You should also be able to identify what level of measurement your variable will produce and what you will do with the data you receive in terms of analysis. If you’ve got too many open questions this is likely to lead to you having a number of open responses which are then harder to categorise. As a general rule, if you don’t know why you are asking a question or what you will do with the data, just don’t ask it.

Piloting a questionnaire is really important in terms of ironing out any potential issues. No matter how much time and effort you have put into developing your questionnaire, there is no real substitute for actually trying it out. In fact, sometimes you can take the content for granted so you stop ‘seeing’ what is actually there. It means ‘testing’ your questionnaire out on a few willing volunteers to make   
sure that both the instructions and the questions ‘make sense’ to likely people   
of interest. You will want to pick up spelling and grammatical errors, but also any repetition or lack of clarity, and whether the questions are difficult to understand. Always be prepared to change any element of the questionnaire that isn’t clear. It is also important to pilot the covering letter you send with the questionnaire. Does this clearly explain the purposes of the survey and spell out the value of the research?

Once you have piloted your questionnaire and made any necessary changes you can deliver it. Think about who you will be targeting – so, your sample – and the most effective way of sending it out. There are various ways in which questionnaires can be administered. These include: email surveys, online surveys, postal surveys, household ‘drop-off’ surveys, and even structured interviews. Each has strengths and weaknesses that need to be considered in order to identify the most appropriate method for your needs. However, the convenience of email or online surveys has meant they are probably the most popular form of surveys used by students.

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