**Week 3: Questionnaires, Surveys and Interviews**

**First, a review of Types of Research**

Look at Table 5.1 and write a summary, using the note-making grid below for each of the first five research designs:

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| --- | --- |
| **Name of Research Design** | **Summary of its characteristics/sample questions** |
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Which of these 5 are most suited to your research and why? **Include this answer in your assignment 1.**

**Questionnaire Design.**

From Lewin, C. (2005). Elementary quantitative methods. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin (Eds.), *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*. London: SAGE Publications.p219-221.

Questionnaires provide a way of gathering structured and unstructured data from respondents in a standardized way either as part of a structured interview or through self-completion. Often, the data collected are numerical (a measurement) or can be represented numerically (ranked in order of preference for example) and can thus be analysed using statistical techniques. Self-completion questionnaires are also a cost-effective way of collecting data from a large number of widely dispersed participants, particularly if postage costs can be avoided by, for example, asking individuals such as teachers or employers to supervise completion of questionnaires by groups. However, in questionnaire design there are many issues that need to be considered in order to (a) maximize the responses and (b) be confident that it is an instrument that is reliable and valid.

Key point from this paragraph

Thought needs to be given as to whether the questionnaire should be completed anonymously or not, depending on the sensitivity of the questions being asked. Questionnaires may or may not be truly anonymized depending on the sampling strategy employed. Respondents can be asked to optionally give names and contact details if they agree to being willing to participate in the research further, for example through follow-up telephone interviews. It may be necessary to keep a record of who has and has not responded (in order to send reminders for example) in which case questionnaires can be part anonymized by giving respondents a unique identifier. In such cases, respondents should be assured that the information identifying them will be destroyed at the data processing stage or not taken into account during analysis.

Key point from this paragraph

A questionnaire should have clear aims and objectives and be structured logically into sections and subsections (if necessary) with filter questions to ensure that respondents only answer relevant questions (for example, `if yes, go to question 10D. The researcher should ensure that the data will be relevant and sufficient to answer the research questions as it is difficult to collect additional data after the questionnaires have been returned. It is often useful to include demographic data (those used to describe the population and its subgroups) such as gender, age and occupation. Often these questions appear at the beginning of the questionnaire because they can be answered easily and quickly although some (for example Oppenheim, 1992: 108-9) caution against this practice on the grounds that it can be seen as a personal intrusion by respondents and hence deter them from continuing. Either way, the first group of questions should be easy to answer. Be aware that if a limited amount of time is allocated to the completion of the questionnaire the respondent (for example young children) may not get to the end.

Key point from this paragraph

Highly structured *closed questions* are more suitable for large-scale surveys, as they are quick for respondents to answer and are easy to analyse using statistical techniques, enabling comparisons to be made across groups. Question types include: dichotomous questions (yes/no), multiple choice and Likert or rating scales (for example indicating how often an action is undertaken from ‘always’ to ‘never’. In ratings, odd scales (3, 5, 7 points) allow respondents m remain neutral. Some respondents may avoid extreme responses (either end of the scales) in which case a 3-point scale may need to be avoided. Even scales (4, 6 points) force respondents to indicate which aspect they favour (for example, to agree or disagree with a statement). However, scales may force a particular response, may not include all possible options and do not always allow for additional comments. Open-ended questions are more suited to qualitative approaches allowing the respondent to give a free response in continuous text Open-ended questions rather than closed questions can be more appropriate to elicit sensitive information. However, they are more difficult to code (categorize) and classify. In self-completion questionnaires, there should not be too many open-ended questions as they are more time-consuming to complete and respondents need adequate space to give their answers.

Key point from this paragraph

**In Summary:**

Questionnaires often have a combination of question types and collect data on facts, attitudes and beliefs. Questions can be direct or indirect. Attention must be given to the wording of the questions themselves in order to maximize reliability. Questions should:

* be clear and unambiguous and not use technical language or language that is inappropriate for the respondents;
* not lead the respondents to particular answers;
* be simple rather than complex;
* avoid questions that are double-barreled (ask more than one question simultaneously, for example `do you own a mobile or a landline?' - if respondents say yes how do you know whether they own a mobile only, a landline only or both?)
* avoid the use of negatives and double negatives; and ensure that in multiple choice questions and rating scales all categories are considered and are mutually exclusive (if a single response is required); avoid questions that may antagonize or irritate respondents or could be perceived to be threaten

**Some final thoughts . . .**

* Instructions on how to complete the questionnaire should be explicit, clear and polite. It is good practice to repeat instructions for each section as often as necessary. Researchers should be aware that respondents will interpret imprecise words such ‘sometimes’, ‘often’, ‘very little’ differently, so whenever possible more precise terms should be used - for example, ‘at least once a week’. Researchers should be aware that respondents may not always answer accurately or may give the answer that they feel is expected - this can occur both with children and adults. This will introduce an element of bias. Questions that introduce an element of cross-checking can be useful.
* Questionnaires do not always have to rely on words to elicit information. With children and adults with poor literacy skills for example, pictures can be used to represent possible responses. Vignettes can be used to provide a context for a question and make it more meaningful and are often helpful for eliciting opinions and data relating to more sensitive issues. Use of graphics and colour can make questionnaires visually more interesting and stimulate responses, making completion more fun especially for children. Layout should be uncluttered and inviting with plenty of space for open-ended answers but also be consistent (all responses indicated by ticking a box or by circling the appropriate answer).
* For self-completion questionnaires, length and ease of completion should be considered. It is helpful to indicate at the beginning or in a covering letter how long completion might take. It is beneficial to include a brief note at the end of the questionnaire to ask respondents to check that they have answered all questions, remind them of the date by which the questionnaire should be returned and thank them for their time.
* Piloting a questionnaire (testing it with a limited number of individuals who are similar to the sample) is crucial and can highlight ambiguities and other potential pitfalls.

**Interviews**

*Most of us will have had considerable experience of being interviewed. Think of the physical and social settings in which those interviews have taken place? How relaxed or informal were they? How structured or unstructured were they? What prior information was provided? How conversational? How were you treated? Who else was present?*

The physical and social setting in which the interview takes place is very important. An interview which takes places in your own home is usually very different from one that takes place at the Social Welfare Office or Job Seeker Centre. A telephone interview may be seem more impersonal and lack the same degree of warmth as a face-to-face interview.

An interview conducted by a census collector will be highly structured because the person carrying out the interview is only interested in finding our certain factual information. Many interviews are semi-structured. The interviewer has a central store of generally open-ended questions which provide a focus for the interview. However, as the interview proceeds it may go off in unexpected directions.

Most interviewers try to establish a warm and supportive social climate in which the person being interviewed is reassured and relaxed but this may not always be the case. Somebody who feels insecure or uncomfortable may be playing with their hair and putting their hands up the sleeve of the jumper, reluctant to make eye contact, or speak up sufficiently to be heard. If the interviewer is nervous, this nervousness can affect the person being interviewed. You may have had the experience of being interviewed by somebody who seems to be staring at some spot above your head as if you weren’t really there, or you might have felt uncomfortable by the way somebody seems to look straight through you. This way of regarding someone is called ‘the judgemental gaze’ and symbolises the power one person, usually a superior, has over an inferior. Such symbolic behaviour also serves to position the subject. The person being interviewed is positioned as a subject of the interviewer and is subjected to the questions. Sometimes the interviewer appears to be giving mixed messages and you do not know what they are really thinking.

Key point

The questions we ask in an interview and the way we ask them determine the responses we receive. Questions can be classified into three categories: probing, clarifying and interpreting. Very often people’s responses are vague or unclear and it is necessary to probe in some detail to determine what they really believe. Some utterances require clarification whereby the interviewer may summarise what he or she thinks has been said. Some questions may be interpretive, checking that the interviewer has interpreted correctly what was meant. Sometimes we are faced with questions which are enormously complex or philosophical which we cannot possibly answer satisfactorily without thinking of the issues beforehand. As you will know from your class teaching a slight modification in the phrasing of the question can lead to unexpected responses.

Key point

Interviewers have to guard against leading the witness. This can occur without the interviewer being aware of it. Some interviewers talk too much and fill in with their own observations about an issue. It does not take us long to realise where the interviewer is coming from and this gives us a clue as to how to frame our responses. The purpose of an interview is not always transparent and respondents might experience a feeling of deception or being manipulated. Sometimes interviews take place in group situations but as Barbour & Schostak (2005) point out this can lead to the muting of certain voices, the exertion of external pressures, and a predominance of exaggerated opinions.

Key point

Another consideration with interviewing us to what extent can we trust the words of others? What status can we give their words? Many responses contain equivocation and ambiguity. This may not be intended but results from the interview process itself. Moreover there is a performance element in interviewing. The speaker is performer who is trying to entertain and present themselves in a particular way. At some stage the researcher has to make an assessment of the wholeheartedness, commitment, and seriousness of the respondents.

Key point

Finally we need to consider the process of interpreting the transcript. The punctuation we impose on the spoken utterances can affect interpretation, so can cultural and ethnic considerations. Some conversation analysts do not use punctuation for this reason. Very often statements are taken out of context and placed in public domain which can cause harm to the respondent.

Key point

**TASK:**

1. Plan your questionnaire on paper. You may wish to look at SurveyMonkey to get an idea of the different question types you can use.

2. Consider whether you’ll use interviewing. If so, who will you interview? What questions will you ask? How will you record/transcribe their responses.

3. Now look again at the ‘Field Research’ handout, at Table 5.2. How might you use Observation or Journalistic techniques in your research?

4. Finally, use the above material to gather your research plan together and begin work on Assignment 2.