

Lesson 15

Self-Report Techniques: Questionnaires



Lesson Objectives

- All students **will** define key terms relating to the use of questionnaires in psychological research.
- All students **should** analyse the design of questionnaires and evaluate their use in psychological research.
- All students **could** design a questionnaire using the guidance about questionnaire construction and writing effective questions.

Key Words

- Self-report technique
- Questionnaire
- Closed question
- Open question
- Social desirability bias
- Response bias

Extension activity:

- Have a go at some online psychology tests at the following website: <http://testyourself.psychtests.com> There are all sorts of tests for you to try, from finding out your 'emotional intelligence' to exploring the kind of career that you would find fulfilling. As you complete the tests, look at how the questionnaires are structured.



Questions to guide your thinking...

- What are self-report techniques?
- What is the difference between an open and a closed question?
- Which kinds of data do these questions generate?
- What are the strengths and limitations of using questionnaires in research?
- What ethical issues are raised by the use of questionnaires in research?

Self-Report Techniques

Self-report techniques include any method where a participant is asked to **state or explain** their own opinion, behaviours, thoughts or experiences in relation to a given topic. For the A-level exam, you need to know about two self-report techniques: **questionnaires** and **interviews**.

Questionnaires

A questionnaire is a self-report technique which allows participants to directly provide information about themselves. They consist of a set of **pre-written questions** which can be printed and given to participants **face to face**, or can be **posted**, filled in **by phone**, completed **over the internet**, or simply **left in public places**.

Questionnaires use a number of different styles of questions, but these can broadly be divided into **open questions** and **closed questions**.

➤ Complete the table below and then give an example of each type of question:

Question Type	Type of data yielded	Advantage	Disadvantage
Open Questions Respondents can answer in their own words.			
Closed Questions There is a fixed number of predetermined responses			

Example of an open question:

Example of a closed question:

Issues in Questionnaire Design

- There are a few problems with the questions – and other things – on the following questionnaires. See if you can spot them:

Your Plans for the Future

Please answer every question

1. How old are you?

- 11-13 13-15 15-17 17-19

2. Do you know what job you want to do in the future?

- Yes Not sure No

3. Do you agree that it is best to go to university after school?

- Yes No

4. Do you disagree with the idea that already extortionate university fees should not increase?

- Yes No

5. Do you think that it is important to choose your university based on its location and number of student societies?

- Not important A little important Fairly important Very important

6. What is important to you about your future job?

- High salary Flexible hours Location Personal interest

- Other, please state _____

Thank you for taking part!

Underage Drinking Questionnaire

Name _____

Address _____

Age _____ Sex _____

How often do you drink alcohol?

How many units do you drink a week? _____

Do you binge drink? Yes No

Why do you drink alcohol? (1) because it's fun to get drunk
(2) because all my friends do it
(3) because it makes me confident
(4) other

Do you understand the health risks of drinking and why do you still do it?

Types of Closed Question

Closed questions come in various forms:

Fixed choice option (or categorical questions) include a list of possible options and respondents have to indicate those that apply to them:

e.g. What is your school year?

Year 7

Year 8

Year 9

e.g. What clubs do you take part in? (tick all that apply)

Drama club

Orchestra

Choir

Chess club

Debating society

With a **Likert scale**, respondents indicate their agreement (or otherwise) with an item using a scale that usually has five points:

I feel happy when I am at school

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

I worry about going to school

Never Rarely Some of the time Most of the time Always

A **rating scale** works in a similar way but gets respondents to identify a value (i.e. number) that represents their strength of feeling about a particular topic.

Questionnaires: Evaluation

- Using the information from the textbook (below), **summarise** the strengths and limitations of questionnaires:

Evaluation

Strengths

Questionnaires are cost-effective. They can gather large amounts of data quickly because they can be distributed to large numbers of people (note that it is the number of people that is important as this determines the volume of data collected). A questionnaire can be completed without the researcher being present, as in the case of a postal questionnaire, which also reduces the effort involved.

The data that questionnaires produce is usually straightforward to analyse and this is particularly the case if the questionnaire comprises mainly fixed choice closed questions. The data lends itself to statistical analysis, and comparisons between groups of people can be made using graphs and charts.

Limitations

A major problem is that the responses given may not always be truthful. Respondents may be keen to present themselves in a positive light and this may influence their answers. For example, if asked 'How often do you lose your phone' most people would underestimate the frequency. This is a form of **demand characteristic** called **social desirability bias**.

Questionnaires often produce a **response bias**, which is where respondents tend to reply in a similar way, for instance, always ticking 'yes' or answering at the same favoured end of a **rating scale** (discussed on the next spread). This may be because respondents complete the questionnaire too quickly and fail to read questions properly. A particular form of response bias, **acquiescence bias**, is discussed below right.

Apply it Concepts: Social desirability bias

The following items appeared on a lifestyle questionnaire:

- | | |
|---|--------|
| 1. Have you ever taken illegal drugs? | YES/NO |
| 2. Have you ever had unprotected sex? | YES/NO |
| 3. Have you ever drunk alcohol under the legal age limit? | YES/NO |
| 4. Do you regularly give money to charity? | YES/NO |

Question

Explain why the items above may produce a social desirability bias.

Strengths

Limitations

Designing an Effective Questionnaire

A good questionnaire provides an objective and systematic way of doing psychological research (i.e. it is a scientific tool), so that the data collected accurately reflect what people think and/or feel. In general, a questionnaire should be **clear, simple** and mean the same thing to all respondents. Importantly – this may seem obvious – it should provide the **information** that the researcher is looking for. Below are some tips for constructing an effective questionnaire.



Structure

Breaking the questionnaire down into the following sections can make it easier for researchers to design and for respondents to complete.

- **Sociodemographic information** – start with background details about respondents that it would be useful to know.
- **Main section** – can this be broken down into further sections?
- **Open question to end** – it is often useful to end the questionnaire with a question that gives people the opportunity to tell you anything they think is important.

Questions

- **Number and type of questions** – are there enough questions to gain the data needed and will the answers be easy to analyse?
- **Sequence** - start with the easy ones and save the ones that may make people anxious or defensive for when the respondent has relaxed.
- To reduce bias and increase clarity **AVOID**:
 - **Jargon** (technical terms) and complicated wording.
 - **Double-barrelled questions** (e.g. Do you suffer from sickness and headaches?).
 - **Leading questions** that suggest a particular answer (e.g. How afraid are you of crime in your area?).
 - **Emotive language** (e.g. Do you agree that the government has destroyed our once-proud NHS?).
 - **Double negatives** (e.g. Are you against banning capital punishment?).

Other things to consider

- **Ethics** – gain informed consent (tell the respondent the aims of the research and allow them to give consent e.g. via a tick box); assure respondents that any information they provide will be kept securely and only used for the stated purpose of the study (confidentiality); avoid intrusive questions that could cause emotional distress.
- **Sampling** – think carefully about your target population and how you will select your sample.
- **Pilot study** - questions can be refined in response to any difficulties encountered.
- **Make it easy to complete** – tell people at the start how long it should take to complete, help them keep track by numbering the questions and pages and thank them at the end for taking part.