

REAL WORLD RESEARCH



Developing a Questionnaire

2nd edition



Bill Gillham



Real World Research

Developing a Questionnaire 2nd Edition

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Series Foreword

The success of the first books in this series was encouraging but not entirely surprising. Research is a practical activity and few methods titles, even relatively advanced ones, are sufficiently practical at the level of useable detail. And those hefty, apparently comprehensive ‘introductory’ tomes – dispiriting to students – are usually only adequate for writing exam answers: hardly an end in itself.

A further limitation of existing texts is that they tend to present a prescription impossible within the constraints of a modest research project in a real-world setting. Or, indeed in anything less than an ideal world. Like any other engagement with reality, research is often a matter of making the best compromise that none the less preserves the essential values of a disciplined investigation.

Bill Gillham

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The Pros and Cons of Questionnaires

It is easy to construct a questionnaire. With a word processor it is possible to put together in an evening something that looks quite respectable. After all, we know what questionnaires look like: hardly a week goes by without some such coming our way.

Journalists often make them up (the term is exact) to fill in space in a magazine, with titles such as 'Are You A Party Bore?' or 'Judge Your Own Social Class'. They may be quite amusing to fill in and no one takes them seriously, least of all their originators. But many so-called 'research' questionnaires are put together in a no more impressive fashion.

Yet developing a questionnaire that will yield worthwhile data is difficult. And it has to be said here that the quality of the data emerging from even an adequately developed questionnaire is not wonderful. More on that later. The essential point is that good research cannot be built on poorly collected data; and even if the data are intended for nothing more than the oblivion of a master's degree dissertation, everything that follows from them is unsound. As a basis for practical action, poorly collected data will be wasteful of time and money, and discredit the name of 'research'.

The great popularity of questionnaires is that they provide a 'quick fix' for research methodology; no single method has been so much abused. This is a pity, because

questionnaires have their place as one method, of most value when used in tandem with other methods. This *multi-method* approach to real-life questions is important, because one approach is rarely adequate; and if the results of different methods converge (agree, or fit together) then we can have greater confidence in the findings.

Why questionnaires?

Questionnaires are just one of a range of ways of getting information from people (or answers to our research questions), usually by posing direct or indirect questions. Incidentally, one of the weaknesses of questionnaires is that they seek to get answers *just* by asking questions. Table 1.1 presents this range schematically; this needs to be studied before you read on.

From Table 1.1 you can see that questionnaires are at the ‘structured’ end of the continuum. By this is meant that the researcher determines the questions that are asked and the range of answers that can be given. Of course, the ‘respondent’ has a choice; *yes/no*, *agree/disagree*, ticking one answer out of four or five, and so on. But the researcher has already decided on the possible answers: all he or she wants to find out is *which* answers are selected. This makes it very tidy for the researcher and easy to analyse. It can also be boring and frustrating for the respondent, although this depends to some extent on the amount of development work the researcher put into the questionnaire before it was distributed.

However, it is obvious that if all the questions and all the possible answers are determined in advance, the element of discovery is much reduced (unless there is a very unexpected pattern to the answers selected). You don’t know what lies behind the responses selected or, more importantly, answers the respondents might have given had they been free to respond as they wished. It is partly for this reason that