

WRITING UP RESEARCH

**CURRENT TRENDS IN
THE HUMANITIES**

Edited by
**Z. I. Oseni,
V. A. Alabi,
O. C. Medubi**



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Chapter Five

QUESTIONNAIRES AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN RESEARCH

Olalere Adeyemi and Issa O. Sanusi

Introduction

Academic research involves two types of investigation – **library investigation** and **field investigation** (Samarin, 1967). Library investigation aims at collecting second-hand data and more importantly to familiarize the researcher with a theory or set of theories that is/are in use, as well as the current thinking in the particular area of study in which the researcher is carrying out his research (Sanusi, 2010). On the other hand, field investigation is aimed at collecting first-hand data. In the Humanities, such data collection could be carried out through various methods like oral interview, wordlist, focus groups, telephone surveys, mail surveys, e-mail surveys, internet surveys, observations and questionnaires. Each of these methods of data collection does not constitute a separate, water-tight method, because the combination of more than one method of data collection in one study does enrich the study immeasurably. However, our focus in this paper is on Questionnaires and their significance in research.

The paper is divided into seven sections namely;

1. What is a Questionnaire?
2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Questionnaires
3. Design of Questionnaires
4. Qualities of Good Questionnaires
5. Administration of Questionnaires
6. Ethical Issues in the Design of Questionnaires
7. Conclusion

What is a Questionnaire?

A questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions and other prompts for the purpose of gathering information from respondents. Ezejelue and Ogwo (1990:94) define a questionnaire as “a device for obtaining answers to research – relevant questions from a sample of respondents”.

A questionnaire is a group of printed questions used to collect information from the people who answer them usually called (respondents). The questions may be either open-ended, where respondents are required to answer in their own words, or multiple-choice, where respondents are required to select one or more answers from those provided. The respondents may also be provided with check-lists or rating scales. The questions may be concerned with the respondents' personal background, factual knowledge, attitudes or opinions. For example:

Open-ended Question

Please, fill in the gap in your own words:

1. What is your name?.....
2. Mention only four branches of Linguistics.
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
3. List in order of preference, what you do on daily basis.....

The other example is the multiple-choice questions. It may be **Yes** or **No** format. It may also be in scales. For example:

4. The progenitor of the Yorùbá race is Odùduwà.
Yes [] No []
5. Exercises are good for the body. Yes [] No []
6. Please, answer the following questions by ticking [✓] the appropriate item in each of the boxes.

Your teacher uses instructional materials during teaching.

S/N	Often used	Not often used	Not used
1	Television		
2	Radio		
3	Computers		
4	Video Tape		

Advantages of Questionnaires

1. Questionnaires are very cost effective when compared with face-to-face interview. This is especially true of studies involving large sample sizes and large geographical areas. Written questionnaires become even more cost effective as the number of research questions increases.
2. Questionnaires are easy to analyze and most statistical analysis software can easily process them. Data entry and tabulation for nearly all surveys can be easily done with many computer software packages.
3. Questionnaires are familiar to most people. Nearly everyone has had some experience in completing questionnaires, and generally they do not make people apprehensive.
4. Questionnaires reduce an interviewer's bias because there is uniform question presentation. Unlike in person-to-person interviewing, there are no verbal or visual clues to influence a respondent to answer in a particular way.
5. Questionnaires are less intrusive than telephone or face-to-face surveys. When a respondent receives a questionnaire in his/her mail, he/she is free to complete the questionnaire based on his own time-table. Unlike other research methods, the respondent is not interrupted by the research instrument.
6. Questionnaires generally require less skill to administer when compared to other data collection methods.
7. The reliability of the responses is generally higher; this arises from greater assurance of anonymity of the

respondent.

8. Questionnaires often have standardized answers that make them a good method of data collection.

Disadvantages of Questionnaires

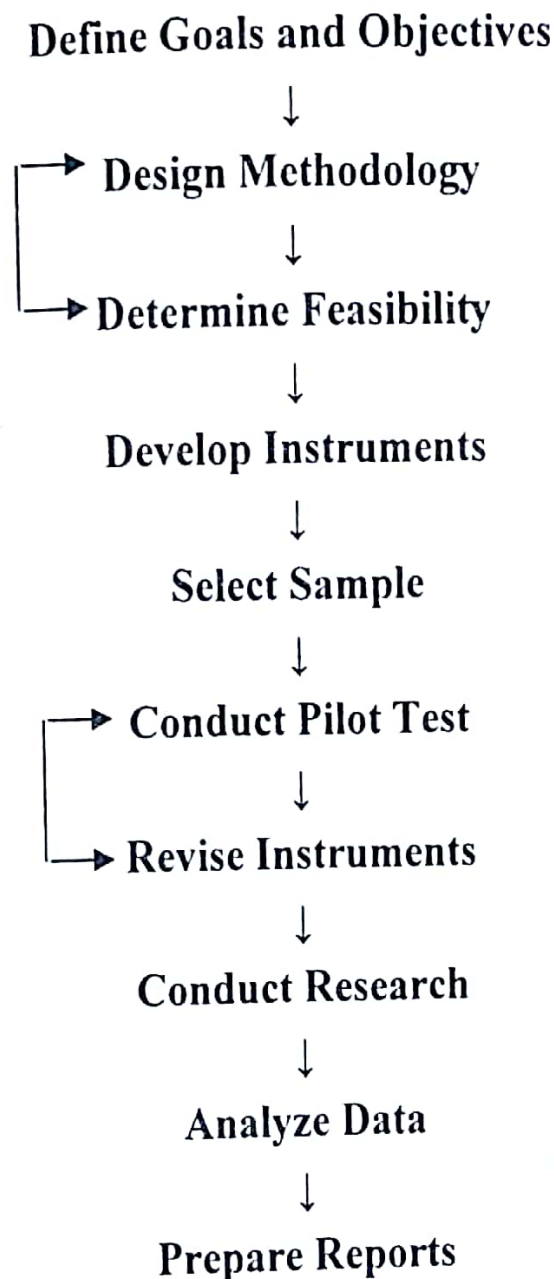
1. Despite the advantages outlined above, there are disadvantages in the use of questionnaires. There are cases in which the use of questionnaires is not suitable for data collection. For example, written questionnaire will not be suitable for collecting data among the group of poorly educated or illiterate people, because they lack reading skills. For instance, it will be extremely difficult to use questionnaires to collect data from Yorùbá oral poets, traditional herbalists and people who can neither read nor write.
2. Another major disadvantage of questionnaires is the possibility of low response rates. Low response reduces the degree of authenticity in statistical analysis. It can dramatically lower confidence in the results. Response rates vary widely from one questionnaire to another.
3. Questionnaires limit the researchers' ability to probe responses. Structured questionnaires often lose the "flavour of the responses" because respondents often want to qualify their answers (Walonick 1993:1). By allowing frequent space for comments, the researcher can partially overcome this disadvantage.
4. For some demographic groups, conducting a survey of questionnaire may not be practical.
5. Nearly ninety per cent (90%) of all communication is

visual. Gestures and other paralinguistic features of communication are not available in written questionnaires. Lack of personal contact will have different effects depending on the type of information being requested. A questionnaire requesting factual information will probably not be affected by the lack of personal contact. A questionnaire probing sensitive issues of attitudes may be severely affected.

6. Questionnaires may get to a wrong hand if posted or sent to respondents. It is natural to assume that the respondent is the same person you sent the questionnaire to. This may not actually be the case. Many times, questionnaires get into wrong hands for completion. For instance, housewives sometimes respond for their husbands, while subordinates respond for their bosses. For a variety of reasons, respondents may not be who you think they are. Therefore, confounding errors are inherent in such questionnaires.
7. Any omissions in the responses are difficult to interpret.
8. In structured questionnaires, the possibility of loss of validity exists where none of provided alternative answers represents the respondent's true feeling about an issue.

Design of Questionnaires

Questionnaires research design proceeds in an orderly and specific manner. The steps required to design a questionnaire is represented in the Research Flow Chart below. Each item in the flow chart depends upon the completion of the process of each of the previous items.



(Source: Statpac (2010))

The importance of well-defined objectives cannot be overemphasized. A questionnaire that is written without a clear goal and purpose is inevitably going to overlook important issues and waste respondents' time by asking

useless questions. The questionnaire may lack a logical flow thereby causing the participant to lose interest. Once the objective is not stated, it will affect all the other stages. It would be difficult to reach insightful conclusions at the end of the study. So, stating objectives in the design is essential. Under the Design Methodology, the researcher decides what type of questionnaire is to be used, is it going to be open-ended or structured? Is it going to be Yes or No or the multiple choice, which is the most useful? Is it going to be a quantitative or qualitative questionnaire? Once that is settled, the researcher then determines the feasibility of the design – cost, and other logistics. The next phase is to develop the questions. The best way to ensure a good questionnaire design can be expressed as follows:

The design of the questionnaire becomes considerably easier if it is developed to directly address the goals of the study. In designing questionnaire, there are certain features the designer must bear in mind.

Qualities of Good Questionnaires

1. Good questionnaires evoke the truth. Questions must be non-threatening. When a respondent is concerned about the consequences of answering a question in a particular manner, there is every possibility that the answer will not be correct. Anonymous questionnaires that contain no identifying information are more likely to produce honest responses than those identifying the respondent.

If your questionnaire contains sensitive items, remember to clearly state your policy on confidentiality.

The purpose of a survey is to find out information. A questionnaire that asks for a response on more than one dimension will not provide the information you are seeking. A good question asks for one bit of information at a time. For example: please, tick [✓] the appropriate box.

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A	B	C	D
Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

This type of question is seeking for information in two different fields at a time. This is called a “double-barreled question”. It is not a good question.

3. A good questionnaire is the one that can accommodate all possible answers. Multiple-choice items are the most popular type of survey questions because they are generally the easiest for a respondent to answer and the easiest to analyze.

Asking a question that does not accommodate all possible responses can confuse and frustrate the respondent. For example, consider the question:

What brand of crown do you own?

1. Àrè crown
2. Séséfunfun crown

There are many problems with this question. What if the respondent does not own a crown? What if he owns different brands of crown? What if he owns both “Àrè and Séséfunfun

crown”? There are two ways of solving this kind of problem:

The first is to make each response a separate dichotomous item on the questionnaire. For example,

- i. Do you own “Àrè crown”? (circle Yes or No)
- ii. Do you own “Séséfunfun crown”? (circle Yes or No)

Another way of solving the problem is to add the necessary response categories and allow multiple responses. This method is preferable because it provides more information than the previous method.

What brand of crown do you own?

(Check all that apply and tick one)

- A. Do not own a crown
- B. Àrè crown
- C. Séséfunfun crown
- D. Oríkògbófo

4. A good question must have mutually exclusive options. A good question leaves no ambiguity in the mind of respondent. There should be only one correct or appropriate choice for the respondent to make. A good example is:

Where did you grow up?

- A. Country
- B. Farm
- C. City

A person who grew up on a farm in the country would not know whether to select choice A or B. This question would not provide meaningful information. Worse than that, it could frustrate the respondent and the questionnaire might find its way to the dust-bin.

5. A good question produces variability of responses. When a question produces no variability in responses, we are left with considerable uncertainty about why we asked the question and what we learned from the information. If a question does not produce variability in responses, it will not be possible to carry out any statistical analysis on the item. For example,

What do you think about the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages' report?

A. It's the worst report I have ever read

B. It's somewhere between the worst and the best

C. It's the best report I have ever read.

Since almost all responses would be choice B, very little information is learned. Design your questions in such a way that they are sensitive to differences between respondents. See another example.

Are you against drug abuse? (circle Yes or No).

Again, there would be very little variability in responses and we will be left wondering why we asked the question in the first place.

6. Transition between questions should be smooth. Grouping questions that are similar will make the

questionnaire easier to complete, and the respondent will feel more comfortable. Questionnaires that jump from one unrelated topic to another will appear disjointed and are not likely to produce high response rates.

7. Avoid a leading question that would lead the respondent into giving the answer you would not like to receive. Leading questions are usually easily spotted because they use negative phrases. For example,

Wouldn't you like to receive our free Yorùbá studies brochure?

Don't you think the senate is spending too much money?

These types of questions are not acceptable in quality research study that request objective responses to questions.

8. A good questionnaire does not use emotionally loaded or vaguely defined words.

9. A good questionnaire does not use unfamiliar words or abbreviations. Always remember who your audience is while designing your questionnaire. Do not use uncommon words or compound sentences. Use simple and short sentences. Common abbreviations are okay if you are absolutely certain that every respondent will understand their meanings. If there is any doubt at all, do not use such abbreviations.

10. Branching in written questionnaires should be avoided. While branching can be used as an effective probing technique in telephone and face-to-face interview, it should not be used in written questionnaires because it sometimes confuses respondents. An example of branching is given in

a - c) below:

a. Do you currently have a chieftaincy title?
(Yes or No) if no, go to question 3.

b. How much did you pay your king then?

c. Chieftaincy institution should be cancelled
(Yes or No) if no, go to question 6

Administration of Questionnaires

A Written Questionnaire (also known as self-administered questionnaire) is a data-collection tool in which written questions are presented. Such questions are to be answered by the respondents or informants in written form.

Methods of administering written questionnaires include the following:

- i. Sending questionnaires by mail with clear instructions on how to answer the questions and asking for mailed responses.
- ii. Gathering all or part of the respondents in one place at one time, giving oral or written instructions, and letting the respondents fill out the questionnaires.
- iii. Hand-delivering questionnaires to respondents and collecting them later.

Ethical Issues in the Design of Questionnaires

As we design questionnaires for the purpose of collecting data, we need to consider whether our questions are likely to cause any physical or emotional problems. For example, emotional problems may be caused by any of the following:

1. Violating informants' right to privacy by posing sensitive questions.
2. Allowing personal information to be made public which informants would want to be kept private.
3. Failing to observe/respect certain cultural values, traditions or taboos valued by your informants, etc.

It is recommended that if sensitive questions are to be asked, it is advisable to omit names and addresses from the questionnaires.

Conclusion

In this paper efforts have been made to discuss issues relating to questionnaires and the significance of questionnaires as a data-collection technique. Issues raised and discussed include defining what questionnaire is all about, advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires, how to design good questionnaires, qualities of good questionnaires, administration of questionnaires and some peculiar ethical issues that need to be addressed while designing questionnaires.

In conclusion, it is our submission that in using any of the data-collection techniques, a researcher needs to be systematic in his or her approach. In other words, a researcher is not only expected to have a good knowledge of his or her area of study but a clear idea of the objectives of the study. This will no doubt be of assistance in designing his/her questionnaire. The objects of study may include, people, phenomena, objects, etc. Having a good knowledge of the **settings** of such

objects of study will also be an added advantage in designing questionnaires.

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