

Why a questionnaire by Paul Garrud

Learning objective: To be able to explain when a questionnaire is an appropriate research tool

www.ucel.ac.uk/rlos/questionnaire/

1 Introduction

We all come across questionnaires frequently but to find out how suitable they are we need to ask two questions:

What do we want to use a questionnaire for?

Have alternative methods been considered – eg observation, interview, or focus group?

Observation (watching, listening, recording how people behave),

Interview (asking and discussing issues, views or experience with someone),

Focus group (the group discusses views and experiences while the researcher observes, listens & records).

2 What do you want to find out?

So questionnaires are a good method of investigation when:

- You know what to ask about
- You need to ask a lot of people
- You can ask standard questions that everyone will understand.

What do you want to find out?

Attitudes, Views or Opinions

Questionnaires are often used for this – eg election polling, consumer research.

Attitudes are usually divided into three components

- beliefs (eg getting sunburnt can increase the risk of skin cancer),
- feelings (eg sunburn is painful)
- intended behaviour (eg I'll buy some sunblock at the airport).

It's a good idea to include questions about each of these components.

Personal experience

Another common use is to find out what has happened to people in the past or present and how they have experienced it. Note: a questionnaire is often preceded by a more exploratory method (eg interview, focus group).

Results do depend on the participants' memory (ie how accurately they can recall what happened and how they felt) and on their willingness to disclose that information

Self-report

Standardized questionnaires are often devised to measure personality, emotional state or the health of an individual

3 Activity

Try matching these issues to the method you think would be best:-

Methods:

a) interview

b) focus group

c) observation

d) questionnaire

Answers (see over)

Issues:

i) how people drive on motorways

ii) the experience of a hip replacement operation

iii) making the environment greener at work

iv) views about care in the community

4 Assessment

For which of the following would a questionnaire be most suitable?

a) Asking about unsafe sexual practices

b) Identifying aggressive school students

c) Obtaining agreement about a job appointment

d) Assessing the amount of pain experienced after caesarean section

Answers

d) is correct

a) You could easily miss asking about some. Participants may not wish to disclose this information

b) Observation would be better

c) Usually done by discussion

Issue	Methods			
	a) Interview	b) Focus group	c) Observation	d) Questionnaire
i) How people drive on motorways	a)i) Well it might be useful to interview someone who knows a lot about it (eg a police patrol), but you might find that people aren't very accurate in their observations of others' driving, or very honest about their own. (see "social desirability" in another rlo)	b)i) Well it might be useful to interview people who know a lot about it – eg AA or RAC patrols - but you might find that people aren't very accurate in their observations of others' driving, or very honest about their own (see "social desirability" in another rlo)	c)i) Yes, this will probably be the most accurate, although it may also take more time and money to research.	d)i) Well, this will let you ask more people (ie than interviews or focus groups) but you might find that people aren't very accurate in their observations of others' driving, or very honest about their own (see "social desirability" in another rlo)
ii) The experience of a hip replacement operation	a)ii) Yes, this will give you the freedom to ask, in detail, about someone's experience; and if you forget to ask about something they may tell you about it anyway. People being interviewed can also put things in their own words (see "comprehensibility" in another rlo)	b)ii) Well, this is good to discover what parts of the experience people have in common, though it may not be possible to find out about a particular person in detail. People in focus groups can also put things in their own words (see "comprehensibility" in another rlo)	c)ii) Well, observation will probably be objective, showing you how people behave, but probably will not let you discover how the operation felt to the patient.	d)ii) Well, this will let you ask more people (ie than interviews or focus groups) but you will only find out about the aspects you have questions for. Standard questions don't leave much scope to find out more detail.
iii) Making the environment greener at work	a)iii) Well, this will give you a good picture of that person's ideas and opinions, but you may need to conduct a lot of interviews to find out if there is shared agreement about any proposal.	b)iii) Yes, having a group of people from the same works would allow them to share ideas and soon show which ones, if any, they agreed about.	c)iii) Well, you might not observe any attempts to make the environment greener, but this doesn't mean that people don't want to improve it.	d)iii) Well, this would be a good way of finding out which changes people agreed about. It might miss asking about some possible changes however.
iv) Views about care in the community	a)iv) Well, you could certainly find out a lot of detail about one person's attitude, but may have to conduct a great deal of interviews.	b)iv) Well, this would be a good way of finding out the consensus views of the group. You might need to run quite a lot of groups, though, to find out what people in general think as well as minority views.	c)iv) Well, observation of some behaviours could be useful (eg helping or discriminatory behaviours). However, you would only find out about participants in direct contact with people being cared for in the community	d)iv) Yes, this would efficiently discover the views of a large number of people.