

Doctoral Research Workshop May 2010

Questionnaires and interviews

Recommended reading: Tim May, *Social Research: issues, methods and process*. Open University Press, (3rd edition) 2001, [HB 300 May] esp Ch 5 on 'Social surveys: design to analysis' and Ch 6 'Interviewing: methods and process'

There are several reasons why questionnaires and interviews can make useful contributions to many research and dissertation projects in the field of science and technology policy. They often seem to be the best, or even the only, ways in which we can obtain information with which to answer some of the most important and interesting questions.

Questionnaires and interviews can be very productive because they can provide new information, and information that could not otherwise be obtained, especially up-to-date information. They are however both highly problematic, but identifying and understanding those problems can contribute to overcoming them.

The two most fundamental challenges that must be faced by researchers using either or both techniques are:

- 1) If you had asked different people, might you have obtained different answers? and**
- 2) What reliance can be placed on the information they have provided?**

If you conduct and report evidence gathered by questionnaires and interviews, those two questions must be explicitly addressed in your dissertation, in both the discussion of the methodology and the substantive empirical discussion, or your use of the evidence from those questionnaires and interviews will not be highly regarded.

How did you select those you interviewed or who received questionnaires? Did you approach a random sample, or a representative sample, or all the key personnel, or as many as you could reach? If you cannot answer 'yes' to any of those questions, you would be well advised to represent your study as a 'pilot' study?

To deal with the second of those challenges, one approach is to ensure that you know as much as possible about the topic before framing and dispatching the questionnaire or conducting the interviews, so that you can spot misleading responses and partial disclosures. Before you conduct either questionnaires or interviews you should prepare some hypotheses about possible, and more or less plausible, answers to your questions. The questionnaires and interviews can then be used to provide checks on those hypotheses. You can also conduct second or subsequent rounds of interviews to check on differences amongst previous answers. You can ask the interviewees about each other's views, and what reasons and/or evidence they can provide to sustain or contest those accounts.

Whether you are conducting questionnaires or interviews, it is vital to your, and to SPRU's, interests that you conduct yourself in a professional manner. That should be reflected in the ways in which you present yourself and your work, and how you follow-up contacts. It is, for

example, professional practice always to provide a follow-up 'thank you' to professional interviewees by post or email.

Questionnaires:

It is remarkably and notoriously difficult to obtain a good response rate to questionnaires. You have to expect a low response rate to most questionnaires, even if your questionnaire is well designed. Try to decide in advance what minimum rate of response you would require. If more than 10% of your recipients fail to respond, your sample is probably unrepresentative, but it is unusual to obtain a response rate above 50%.

Decide at an early stage if the questionnaire will expect anonymous or named respondents.

Always keep the questions as brief, clear and unambiguous as possible.

Always provide a stamped-addressed envelope for replies to a postal survey.

Your target responders probably receive far too many questionnaires, and look for reasons for not responding. Give them as few reasons as possible. Maybe even offer them an incentive to respond, such as a summary of the responses and a brief commentary at the end of the project, although without compromising anonymity.

The rules of thumb are '**keep it tightly focussed**', '**keep it brief**' and '**keep it clear**'. The wording of questionnaires needs to be chosen with great care. Try, in particular, to avoid open-ended, ambiguous or vague questions; they discourage responses and provide information in a form that is extremely hard to analyse.

Take great care to ensure that questions embody as few assumptions as possible. Alternatively offer people the opportunity to indicate that questions are not appropriate in their case.

Questionnaires are methodologically problematic. You will need to be able to justify your choice of sample. If you had asked different people, would you have expected different answers? Can you distinguish between honest and dishonest answers? Might non-responders differ significantly from responders?

Try to locate as precisely as possible the people to whom the questionnaire should be targeted. Questionnaires are often passed down a hierarchy, but that can dilute the value of the information provided.

It is also difficult to obtain information from questionnaires in a form that readily lends itself to analysis, unless the questionnaire is very well designed. Consequently, before finalising questionnaires consider carefully how the results can be, and will be, analysed. **Always conduct a pilot exercise**, piloting **both** the questionnaire **and** the analysis of the responses. A pilot study should help to reduce the ambiguity of the questions. Questions should be as precise and jargon-free as possible.

The number of questions should be as few as possible. For an MSc dissertation, it is unlikely that useful results could be obtained if you ask more than 10 questions, and for a PhD no more than 25.

Decide at a very early stage how you propose to classify and analyse the answers. Investing time on the initial preparation of the analysis can save time subsequently on the conducts of the analysis, and can improve the response rate.

Answers could be invited in various forms including:

- List - select one of several
- Category - tick one box or several boxes
- Ranking - number sequentially
- Scale - how much or how little (relatively)
- Quantity - how much or how little (absolutely)
- Grid - two dimensionally, or more??

As far as the appearance and layout of the questionnaire are concerned, follow the guidance given e.g. by Judith Bell in *Doing Your Research Project* (See e.g. page 64 of 1st Edition). Bell is correct when she points out that sensitive issues should be left to the end of the questionnaire.

Send (or hand out) an accompanying letter with the questionnaire. That letter should identify you, and explain the purpose of the study, and how the results will be used, and indicate where you can be contacted. The letter should not be too brusque nor too ingratiating.

The questionnaire should specify the date by which replied are required.

How to conduct interviews:

Interviews can be more flexible than questionnaires, but the data obtained may be correspondingly harder to analyse.

You must first negotiate access, and agree the basis upon which you will do it. Maybe offer something in return, but not more than you can realistically deliver. Do not allow interviewees to vet your dissertation before it is submitted.

The approach to be adopted in an interview will almost certainly depend on the status of the person being interviewed. Conducting a research interview is not like gathering 'vox pop'. It involves far more subtle and nuanced forms of negotiation. You have to decide how to present yourself, and what kind of information you are seeking to obtain. Think about what kinds of information the person may or may not have. What impression might **they** want to create?

It is always important to be well prepared, in order to detect selective disclosure, 'spin', and bullshit. Prepare very carefully for the interviews. Interviewees are very unlikely to give you more than 1 hour.

Tactically, it may be appropriate to pretend that you know more than you do. As well as asking 'What do you think/believe/know about X?' You can also ask people what their colleagues or competitors think/believe or know about X. You can also say: 'Others have suggested that X; how would you respond?' You can check their comments against each other.

Can you trust your interviewees to tell the truth, let alone the whole truth? Consider what steps you could take to check on the claims made in interviews, or to triangulate interview claims with each other and with other evidence?

If you conduct interviews, and use the results, you must always comment on what might have happened if you had spoken with different people. Might you have received different answers? How and why did you choose to interview just those people? Are they a representative sample, or all the key players? You need to show that you know how to collect, weigh and interpret evidence.

You need to decide how to deal with remarks which are 'off the record', and 'don't quote me, but...' Should you interview people who demand prior sight of your report or text?

Prepare your introduction to the interview. Maybe provide a brief list of (some) questions on paper. Start with the technical issues, and leave sensitive policy issues for later in the discussion. Maybe start with a structured format, and then open up.

Pilot and practice your interviews.

Take rapid notes on paper, and do not assume that using a tape recorder will not influence what is said. You can always add detail to your notes shortly after leaving the interview, while your memory is fresh.