

Worksheet - open ended / closed questions

When Sociologists do research they have to phrase their questions very carefully. They must be clear and straight-forward and have only one possible meaning to the respondent.

It must also be possible to put the information provided into a clear summary.

Here is a list of some questions which are going to be used for a small, random sample of people.

1) Indicate which questions are helpful in Social Research and which are not. Give reasons for your answer;

2) As you are doing this, consider;

Which questions are "open" and which questions are "closed"?

1) What do you think about racism?

2) How many hours homework do you do a night?

a) None

b) Less than one hour,

c) One to two hours,

d) More than two hours.

3) Do you think it was a good thing to go to war with Iraq?

4) Which party do you vote for?

5) Could you explain why people vote for the Conservative Party?

6) Wouldn't you agree that the NHS is in a state of crisis?

7) Do you agree / disagree with the following statement; "religion is in decline in the U.K today"?

8) Why do you think people commit crime?

9) How would you describe poverty?

10) "The family is a patriarchal institution". Do you agree with this statement?

(Created by David Keir 2003)

Answers!

1) What do you think about racism?

This is an “open” question because the respondent is free to express a diverse range of responses and is not confined to giving a “set” answer.

As a question, it is fairly innocent and effective. You can almost imagine a child asking such a question. Sometimes it is best to look at it in that way; questions that are innocent and free from *subjectivity* (i.e. *personal opinion*) are often the most effective.

2) How many hours homework do you do a night?

- a) None**
- b) Less than one hour**
- c) One to two hours**
- d) More than two hours**

This is an example of a “closed” question. Why? Well, because you have already pre-determined the range of responses the respondent can give. As a question, this too is effective. However, like most closed questions, there is one vital thing to consider. Say twelve of the respondents chose answer d) – we would not have much of an idea of the diversity of responses that all fall under this option. Some may do bang on two hours a night while others may do four (!). Sometimes closed questions can lead to ambiguous data.

3) Could you explain why it was a good thing to go to war with Iraq?

This is an “open” question. As a question, it is not entirely effective. It carries a lot of subjectivity in it (i.e. as stated above your own norms and values – or more specifically your own opinion). Sometimes this can affect the responses. You are almost persuading the respondent to agree with you. This is not what social research is all about.

4) Which party do you vote for?

Again this is an “open” question. It is innocent and effective.

5) Could you explain why people vote for the Conservative party?

Again, this is also an “open” question. However, consider what has been said in question 3) – be very careful not to be subjective in your questions. A good researcher is aware of the practical limitations of his / her questions.

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6) Wouldn't you agree that the NHS is in a state of crisis?

This is another very bad question. It is simply putting a statement into the form of a question. In a way you are "probing" the respondent to agree with you. Be very careful of this. As a question, it is an "open" question, but do consider the value of a question like this.

7) Do you agree / disagree with the following statement "religion is in decline in the U.K today"?

As a question it does carry a "hint" of subjectivity even though it is asking for your own opinions. Questions like this carry divided opinions among researchers. Some say it is effective because it is probing into what needs to be researched. However, think about the word "decline"; is the researcher acting on an automatic assumption of what is meant by "religion in decline"? Will the respondents pick up on the same definition as the researcher? You need to consider how specific words in the questions are defined by the respondent.

Indeed, it is possible to consider alternatives to questions like question 7); alternatives that cut back on the limitations of how a question is interpreted; for example, a better question may be;

"What do you think is the purpose of religion in today's society?"

8) Why do you think people commit crime?

An effective and innocent question that does not carry any subjectivity. Again, this is an "open" question.

9) How would you describe poverty?

As in question 8) this is also an effective question; though bear in mind the respondent may need some time to think about an answer to this one! It is not easy to define! This is an example of an "open" question because the range of responses are not fixed by the researcher

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10) "The family is a patriarchal institution". Do you agree / disagree with this statement?

As in previous questions, we have an opinion in this question. Be very careful with this – are you persuading the respondent to agree with you? You may not notice it, but it might certainly feel like for the respondent. Consider, also, this word "patriarchy". Will everyone understand such a word? This question is another example of an "open" question.

Some questions, as we have seen carry "practical" problems. However, we also need to be aware of the fact that there could be potential "ethical" limitations to our research as well. Consider, for example, the last question. Some questions are sensitive and this needs to be recognised prior to the research.

A lot of it depends on what you are researching. On doing a questionnaire on poverty once, I was asking questions to a person who was rather "fed up" with my questionnaire. "If you want to know about poverty", he said, "come into my house and you can see what it is".

You can't blame him. Social research does sometimes probe into things that people don't ask enough about. In many ways that is the nature of Sociology – it scratches beyond the surface of the "everyday" to probe into patterns in our society that are often accepted but rarely questioned.

However, along with this, this may lead to tension between the researcher and the researched. Consider, for example, questions regarding the fear of crime – we need to be alert to the fact that some of our respondents may have, themselves been victims of crime. Issues like domestic violence and so also carry with them a great degree of sensitivity.

Every type of research method is likely to carry with them potential draw-backs – both practical and ethical – we can limit them, but, as Steve Taylor argues we can never get rid of them totally!

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