

Chapter 8

Writing Effective Questions

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The purpose of this chapter is to lay out the principles for designing survey questions that will provide reliable and valid estimates of what they are designed to measure.

The chapter is organized around the four essential steps that respondents must take in order to provide an answer to a question: 1) understand what is being asked; 2) recall or otherwise obtain the information needed to answer the question; 3) put the information into the form needed to answer the question; and 4) provide the answer. At each of these steps, the way the question is designed can make it more or less likely that the resulting answer will correspond well with what the researcher intends to measure. The chapter describes what is known about the common problems that arise at each of these steps and the approaches to question design that can avoid or ameliorate those problems

GLOSSARY OF KEY CONCEPTS

Acquiescence. The tendency for respondents to agree or say yes (rather than disagree or say *no* to questions that are put in the form of statements.

Closed-ended questions. Provide the respondent with a set of response alternatives from which to choose an answer.

Construct. The abstract conception of the reality that a question is designed to measure.

Direct rating. A type of question that asks respondents to locate their views of an idea, a person or something else on an abstract continuum.

Indirect rating. A type of question that asks respondents to answer questions that are not themselves direct ratings but from which the values of direct ratings may be inferred.

Multibarreled questions. Questions phrased so that they, in fact, are asking two or more questions at once. As a result, there potentially is more than one answer that the same person could give that would be an accurate answer to one or another part of the question.

Mutually exclusive and exhaustive. Describes response choices for closed-ended questions that provide all respondents with at least one, but only one, option that answers the question.

Open-ended questions. Ask respondents to answer in their own words.

Reliability. The extent to which answers to a question provide consistent results at different times or for different respondents when the values of a construct are the same.

Validity. The extent to which the answer to a question corresponds to the true value for the construct that is being measured.