



430C

Applied Quantitative Methods

Rural Sociology  
with Gender  
Studies

# Asking questions



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# Open questions

## ⌘ Advantages

- ☒ respondents answer in their own terms
- ☒ allow for new, unexpected responses
- ☒ exploratory - generate fixed answer questions

## ⌘ Disadvantages

- ☒ time-consuming for interviewer and respondent
- ☒ difficult to code
- ☒ more effort required from respondent
- ☒ interviewer variation in recording answers



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# Closed questions

## ⌘ Advantages

- ☑ quicker and easier to complete (better response rate and less missing data)
- ☑ easy to process data (pre-coded)
- ☑ easy to compare answers (intercoder reliability)

## ⌘ Disadvantages

- ☑ restrictive range of answers: no spontaneity
- ☑ difficult to make fixed choice answers exhaustive
- ☑ respondents may interpret questions differently



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## Coding

- ⌘ pre-coding - closed answers in surveys
- ⌘ post-coding - use a *coding frame*:
  - ☑ 1. categorize unstructured material
  - ☑ 2. assign a number/code to each category
- ⌘ Bryman & Cramer (2004):
  - ☑ categories must not overlap
  - ☑ cover all possible answers
  - ☑ consistent over time/between coders



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# Types of questions

- ⌘ personal factual questions
  - ☒ age, occupation, marital status and income
- ⌘ factual questions about others
  - ☒ e.g. in the household (partners)
- ⌘ informant factual questions
  - ☒ e.g. as expert of a firm
- ⌘ Attitudes
  - ☒ Likert scale is one of the most frequently encountered formats for measuring attitudes.
- ⌘ Beliefs
- ⌘ normative standards and values
- ⌘ lay knowledge (expert of your own life)



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## Designing questions: general rules

remember your research questions

- ⌘ decide exactly what you want to find out
- ⌘ imagine yourself as a respondent
  - ☑ how would you answer the questions?
  - ☑ identify any vague or misleading questions
  - ☑ think about questionnaire length, style and attractiveness (approx. 20 min.)



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## Designing questions: specific rules

- ⌘ avoid ambiguous terms
  - ☒ 'often', 'regularly', 'frequently', 'have'
- ⌘ avoid long questions
- ⌘ avoid double-barrelled questions
  - ☒ people may have different answers to each part
  - ☒ no necessary correspondence between parts
  - ☒ e.g. "How much time do you spend on going to concerts and the cinema?"
- ⌘ avoid very general questions
  - ☒ difficult to answer because they lack a frame of reference
  - ☒ e.g. "How happy is your family life?"
- ⌘ avoid leading questions
  - ☒ suggest that a particular response is desired
  - ☒ e.g. "Do you think that tuition fees make students less keen to go to university?"



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## Designing questions: specific rules

- ⌘ don't ask two questions in one
  - ☒ e.g. "Which political party did you vote for at the last election?"  
(firstly establish whether respondent voted at all)
  - ☒ don't ask for opinions about several things at once
- ⌘ avoid negative terms ('not', 'never')
  - ☒ especially double negatives – confusing
- ⌘ avoid technical terms, jargon and acronyms
- ⌘ ensure that respondents have the requisite knowledge (are questions meaningful?)
- ⌘ symmetry between closed questions and answers
- ⌘ balanced between positive and negative responses to a question (avoid bias)
- ⌘ don't rely on respondent's memory
- ⌘ include a "don't know" option?



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## Common mistakes when designing questions

- ⌘ excessive use of open questions
- ⌘ excessive use of yes/no questions
- ⌘ no instructions about how to indicate answers (tick box, circle, delete?)
- ⌘ overlapping categories
- ⌘ more than one answer may be applicable
- ⌘ answers do not correspond to the question



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## Vignette questions

- ⌘ present respondents with a scenario (p. 158)
- ⌘ ask them how they would respond or what they think the characters should do
- ⌘ anchors opinions and choices in a concrete, specific context (may be easier to answer)
- ⌘ useful for sensitive topics (Finch, 1987)
  - ☒ less threatening: imaginary characters suggest social distance from respondent



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## Piloting and pre-testing questions

- ⌘ check that the research instrument works
  - ☑ gain practice at using interview schedule
  - ☑ does each question flow smoothly on to the next?
  - ☑ identify vague or confusing questions
  - ☑ remove any questions that received uniform responses
- ⌘ open questions can generate fixed choice answers to include in the final study
- ⌘ pilot respondents should not be in final sample



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## Using existing questions

- ⌘ common practice in survey research
- ⌘ questions have already been piloted
- ⌘ known properties of reliability and validity
- ⌘ helps you to draw comparisons with other studies
- ⌘ 'question banks'
  - ⌘ repositories of questions used in previous surveys
  - ⌘ <http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk/docs/home.html>