

Questionnaire as Method and Instrument of Data Collections : Some Practical Aspects

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Social research is concerned with analysis of relationship between two or more persons, technically termed as explanation of phenomenon which involves description i.e. collection of information in order to know present position; explanation i.e. examination and analysis of factors responsible for and consequences of the present position, and prediction i.e. imagination of future consequences and emergence of further possible relationships. Consequently, social research is based on the information collected from both verbal as well as non-verbal responses. Questionnaire is a major source of documentary response. It can be both a method and type of instrument or technique of data collection.

Questionnaire as Method of Data Collection

As method of data collection, questionnaires is a set of questions or items to be replied by person or persons in order to study their behavior regarding particular event, situation or phenomenon.

The questionnaire is universally used to collect information from large, geographically scattered and diverse groups of people. It is either sent through mail to the respondents or handed over personally to them. The respondent is supposed to answer as per instructions specified in questionnaire.

While using questionnaire as a method of data collection, selection of respondents is of prime importance in order to get good return of the questionnaire sent. The researcher should have knowledge about respondents, background, educational status and mental level in order to determine their capacity to respond, language, leisure time etc. After knowing these things, only those respondents should be selected who can read and respond; and be amenable to regular follows up. Further, in order to avoid unnecessary delay, the selection of respondents should be flexible.

For getting quick and correct responses, certain steps can be undertaken for motivating respondents :

- Firstly, the prior sanction of respondents can be obtained before sending questionnaire to them.
- Secondly, good physical appearance of the questionnaire can also be instrumental in generating interest on the part of respondent. The size of questionnaire should not be much and in case of long questionnaires it should be bifurcated in two or more types.
- Thirdly, the questionnaire should be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelopes in order to avoid financial burden on respondents.
- Fourthly, it must contain a covering letter or motivational paragraph explaining the purpose as well as rationale of research, person or persons carrying out the research, manner in which information is kept and used having sufficient guarantee of anonymity, time schedule of research, and an appeal to altruism.
- Lastly, economic motivators in the form of cash payment against completed questionnaires or lucky draw having same conditions of eligibility can also be applied.

Adequate attention and care is needed in the dispatch of questionnaire; specifically.

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- Firstly, the questionnaire should be sent to respondents at an appropriate time keeping in view of the availability of leisure time on their part for which prior correspondence can be undertaken.
- Secondly, it should bear a clear and correct address.
- Thirdly, it should contain all enclosures.
- Fourthly, it should be dispatched prior in case of distant respondents and through registered post according to its level of significance.

The researcher should know that return of questionnaires is considerably affected by economic and educational status of respondents their language background their extent of interest and respect towards research problem and researcher. The extent of politeness on request also plays a major role in getting returns for this purpose following steps can be undertaken :

- Firstly, the researcher should get sponsorship from a reputed organization of reputed known to all the respondents.
- Secondly, follow-up letters should be issued at appropriate intervals. The first follow-up letter may be of original attached with a duplicate copy questionnaire in order to overcome the problem of loss or missing of questionnaire earlier sent to the respondents. The other two or three letters may be just reminders of which one be sent by registered post.
- Thirdly, in case of defaulters even after follow-up letters, they can be grouped and approached for answering only important questions of the questionnaire.
- Lastly, a messenger or interviewer can be sent for the purpose of making a request to respondents regarding filling up of the questionnaire already sent to them.

Questionnaire as an Instrument

As an instrument, the questionnaire is comprised of a series of questions that are filled in by the respondent himself (Labovitz and Hagedern 1971:51). It may be structured, unstructured and pictorial.

Structured Questionnaires have definite, concrete and preordained questions prepared in advance. These questions may be in closed form when a categorized data are required and in open form when free and spontaneous expressions are needed from respondent. These questions are used either for the exploration of new problems and situation or for intensive study of a limited number of cases. Unstructured questionnaires have definite areas of subject matter and respondent is free to comment and give their expressions. These areas function as a guide. Here flexibility is the main advantage. Pictorial questionnaires are used for the purpose of furthering interest on the part of respondent in answering questions.

Designing of questionnaires : Some steps

For successful and effective designing of questionnaire, the following steps can be taken :

- (1) Decision should be taken about the information needed for the exploration or study of various aspects of selected research problem.
- (2) Decision should be taken about questions from which the above needed information can be elicited and which can be managed after going through the relevant literature available on the subject or by establishing contact with persons related to the research problem.
- (3) Distribution of these questions in different items based on the various aspects of the proposed general hypothesis should be carried out.
- (4) Decision should be taken about the content of questionnaires depending upon the mode of administration, characteristics of the sample and the kind of analysis and interpretation proposed to be done. This content can be either related to the factual

- information regarding individual group, situations etc. or to the attitudes, beliefs, emotions, feelings of individual etc.
- (5) Decision should be taken about type of questions to be asked direct or indirect closed or open, and so on.
 - (6) After this, first draft of questionnaire having questions kept in sequence should be prepared. In order to measure the effects of wording of questionnaire on the consistency of responses, two sets of questionnaire consisting of some common questions and some questions having different wordings in each questionnaire may be tested on the same sample.
 - (7) The first draft of questionnaire should be sent to the knowledgeable persons in the field of study for their expert comments.
 - (8) In the light of comments received from these knowledgeable persons the whole draft of questionnaire should be reexamined.
 - (9) This revised and reexamined questionnaire should be pretested in order to judge the relevance of questions their format for the purpose of getting needed information, and to make any addition and deletion, if needed.
 - (10) After proper editing the results of pretesting, the final draft of questionnaire should be prepared.

Designing of Questionnaire : Some Considerations

(I) *Physical Layout of Questionnaire* : Proper attention should be given towards physical organization and design of questionnaire in order to make it attractive, convenient and handy to respondent and expedient to researcher to identify, code and preserve. The following considerations can prove useful :

- a. Every questionnaire should have one or more identifying marks, may be generally in the form of numbers.
- b. The size of questionnaire should be kept as limited as possible but not at the cost of adequate space and subject matter.
- c. Every item and question should be numbered consecutively throughout the questionnaire with no omissions or repetitions.
- d. Sufficient space for recording the responses as well as margin on left side should be available to respondent. It is also useful to leave space on back page of questionnaire for interviewer's notes and observations or remarks by editors and coders.
- e. The paper used in printing or cyclostyling of questionnaire should be hard, thin, strong, colourful and tested to take ink without daubing or to have markings from ball point pens without penetration.
- f. Different sizes and shades of type/print can be used in different set of questions in order to attract respondents. For example questions to be read verbatim to the respondent can be typed/cyclostyled/printed in regular type and questions having instructions or code categories in capital letters.
- g. Mechanical devices such as arrows, boxes, asterisks and other symbols can often be used with good effect in guiding the respondents through a complicated questionnaire (warwich and Liniger 1975:153)
- h. Every questionnaire should be enclosed with a letter having brief description about the research; sponsoring agency, research problem, its relevance, its nature and scope, its aims and objectives, and an appeal to respondent for his cooperation and interest. This letter should also ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of information available from informant.

(II) Items

The items of a questionnaire should be so arranged that respondents should feel easy in providing information. Generally, items may be grouped there parts ; The First part of questionnaire should consist of identifying information which generally should include the number of questionnaire, respondent or sample unit, heading of questionnaire, name of sponsoring agency, identity of person responsible for investigation, respondent's name, age, sex, marital status, religion, caste, occupation, educational status, background, income, complete address, etc., the Second part should have provision of getting information regarding social background such as nature of family, age, marital status, occupation, income, etc. of family member, and the third part should include questions relating to research problem, arranged according to its various dimensions.

(III) Questions

The wordings, content, typology and arrangement of questions play a vital role in eliciting the needed information. Therefore, adequate attention should be paid in these aspects while formulating questions.

a. Wordings : The wordings of questionnaire should be simple, specific, clear, meaningful and understandable to the respondents. As far as possible, it should avoid professional jargon and technical words. utmost care should be taken to remove complexity, ambiguity, sensitivity and subjectivity in questions.

b. Content : Since questioning is the basis of collection of information in questionnaires, it should be suited for obtaining information about what people know, believe, or expect, feel or want, intend to do or have done and about their explanations or reasons for any of the preceding. The major types of question contents should aim mainly at ascertaining facts; beliefs about what the facts are, ascertaining feelings, discovering standards of action aiming mainly at present and past behaviour, conscious reasons for beliefs, and felling, policies or behaviour (setting, wrightman and Cook, 1976:299-309). These question contents demand proper wording of questions and decide the exact nature of question to be asked.

c. Typology : It is not an easy task to choose questions which are of different types. Mention may be made of open-end questions, close-end questions for specific and pointed information, leading questions for getting a particular response from the respondent, free story or case method questions for detailed information about one unit of study, coincidental, recall or recognition questions for getting information regarding past occurrence, dichotomous questions for making choices between two opposite responses, check list consisting of questions having possible answers of each questions for the purpose of selecting one or more answers by respondent. However, it is generally suggested that balance should be maintained between open-end and close-end questions and as far as possible leading questions should be avoided. The complex and long questions should be broken into parts in order to make them simple and understandable.

d. Arrangement : The sequence of questions should be based on certain principles so that respondents interest can be aroused and his/her doubts or suspicions can be removed resulting into the motivation of respondents for giving correct information. These principles may be :

- i) The easy questions should be placed first in the questionnaires.
- ii) Therever, possible, the question affecting the answer of other question should be separated.
- iii) Every question should be linked.
- iv) Grouping and regrouping of questions should be carried out on the basis of subject matter and

- v) A time-sequence should be observed in the arrangement of questions. (Young, 1966:87)

Reasons for Preference of Questionnaire as Method and Instrument of Data Collection:

1. The Among the main reason for preference of questionnaire administration of questionnaire is less expensive than any other method because questionnaire can be sent through mail, interviewers cannot (Selltitz, Jahoda, Deutsch and Cook, 1959:239). It is clear that the cost of using mail questionnaires in which postal charges take the place of interviewers salaries and expenses is often only a small fractions of that of a field survey, certainly if the latter is based on a random sample (Moser and Kalton, 1971 :257)
2. The administration of questionnaire requires less skill because it is simply mailed or handed over to respondents with minimum of explanation and classification.
3. The questionnaire can be used in case of widely scattered and diverse sample at less cost. It can cover both number and area.
4. It is certainly a quick method of gathering information as it require little time in sending questionnaires to the respondents and getting back the bulk of the returns from them.
5. The collecting of information without influence beloness possible because the respondent can express his opinion freely, frankly and without any brought with kind of interference.
6. In this method, the respondent can consult other persons before recording his response. In cases where information concerning several member of the household is to be collective inter-household or intra-household consultation make till done. In is feasible only in this method and not in that of a door step interview.
7. Respondents have greater confidence in their anonymity due to the absence of researcher/interviewer. They feel more free to answer questions and in some cases may answer certain questions of personalized nature more willingly and accurately while may not be possible in a specially taken interviewer situation is a complete stranger.
8. Respondents are free from the pressure of giving immediate response, and can take their own time for giving information as per convenience.
9. The problem of non-contact is avoided because respondent looner or better gets the mailed questionnaire dispatched to him through mail while in case of interview, possibility of not meeting the respondent is very much there since interviewer in many cases visit for at a one point of time.
10. Unlike interview method wherein presence of several sources of interviewer's errors which at times, seriously undermine the reliability and validity of survey results, the method of questionnaire if free from such problems.

Limitation of Questionnaire

With more plus painth, method of questionnaire has curtain limitation too :

1. The boon of mailed questionnaire to their low cost and the bane is their low response rate (warvick and Lininger, 1975:131). Regardless of the number of follow-ups hundred percent of replies are rarely received from mailed questionnaire when other than a small group is contacted (Goldstein, 1969:22).
2. The population of study is restricted, because respondents must atleast be able to read and write (Labovitz and Magedorn, 1971:51). Collection of information from illiterate respondents is not possible.
3. In order to avoid fatigue and or disinterest on the part of respondent, the length of questionnaire is generally kept as limited as possible. Only simple, straightforward and

easily understandable questions with the help of printed instructions and definitions are included.

4. Due to individual differences, the understanding of questionnaire may be different to different individuals leading to diverse nature of responses.
5. No opportunity for explanation or discussion is available to respondent. The respondent cannot get immediate clarification of any doubt occurred in his mind from researcher. The Researcher is supposed to accept answers to a mail questionnaire, unless rechecking of collection of the questionnaire by interviewers can be afforded. In this way. This method lacks flexibility.
6. Due to lack of observation along with questionnaire it becomes difficult to understand the correct and total picture of the situation.
7. Spontaneous and or immediate answers are not possible because questionnaire is dispatched through mail and respondent takes his own time to answer and return.
8. It is the nature of individuals they go through all questions before answering any one of them with the result answers cannot be treated as independent answers.
9. There is no mechanism available in this method by which validity and reliability of responses as well as respondents can be checked. The response given by respondent, right of wrong have to be accepted as final.
10. Data collection process takes more time; actually much time is consumed in sending and following up. The resultant time gap may change the opinion of respondents regarding particular situation, occurrence of phenomenon and thus may jeopardise the purpose of research.

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