Design and use of questionnaires: a review of best practice applicable to surveys of health service staff and patients

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Record Status
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Citation

Authors' objectives
A selective, narrative literature review was conducted to identify current best practice with respect to the design and conduct of questionnaire surveys, including theories of respondent behaviour, 'expert opinion' and high-quality evidence from experimental studies. The principal foci were:

- modes of survey administration (various forms of interviewer administration and self-completion) - question wording, choice of response formats, and question sequencing - questionnaire formatting and other aspects of presentation - techniques for enhancing response rates, with particular emphasis on postal surveys.

Authors' conclusions
The heterogeneity of findings indicates that there can be no universal recommendations on best practice in respect of questionnaire design and survey conduct. Rather, individual survey researchers need to take into account the aims of the particular study, the population under investigation and the resources available; trade-offs between the ideal and the possible are likely to be needed. However, some general principles can be offered.

The principal objective should always be to collect reliable, valid and unbiased data from a representative sample, in a timely manner and within given resource constraints.

In choosing a mode of questionnaire administration, consideration needs to be given to the availability of an appropriate sampling frame, anticipated response rates, the potential for bias from sources other than non-response, acceptability to the target population, the time available, the financial budget, and the availability of other resources (e.g. skills or equipment).

In formulating questions and response categories, and in determining question order, researchers should bear in mind that survey respondents employ a wide range of cognitive processes in formulating their responses. To minimise bias and to reduce spurious inter-respondent variation, careful attention must be given to these issues.

The "task analysis" model, the theory of social exchange and theories of perception and cognition should inform decisions regarding the physical design of questionnaires, as well as strategies for delivering and returning them. The aim should be to enhance the perceived and actual benefits of responding and to minimise the perceived and real costs. The effort required to interpret questions and provide responses should be made as easy as possible. Strategies for reducing the monetary cost to respondents include the use of prepaid return envelopes and the provision of financial incentives (unless ethical imperatives preclude the latter).

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