

# Sociology Factsheet



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## How and Why do Sociologists use Questionnaires?

A lot of information about society is collected through questionnaires including information on crime and deviance, education, health, family roles etc.

This Factsheet focuses on the use of the closed questionnaire and considers how to construct a questionnaire, as well as discussing the advantages and disadvantages associated with conducting questionnaires.

**Hint:** The way in which the questionnaire is constructed will determine the type and amount of information that is received. If the questionnaire contains **closed questions** then it is possible to **quantify** the results. An **open** questionnaire allows the participant to answer fully but will only allow for **qualitative** data. It is important to consider the type of data that is required.

### Questionnaires

Why use questionnaires?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using questionnaires

How should questionnaires be constructed?

Closed Questions

Open Questions

A **questionnaire** is a tool for measuring attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes that people hold towards issues, topics and other people. Attitudes and opinions cannot be observed and therefore questionnaires can be very useful to allow people to give their own opinions about some issue. For example, it might be used to determine how students feel about completing coursework or taking exams or what they think about conjugal roles within the family.

### Why are questionnaires used to collect data?

There are several reasons why questionnaires are popular with sociologists:

1. Questionnaires can be used to test theoretical ideas
2. Statistics can be produced and analysed thus making sociology more 'scientific'
3. Generalisation from the sample can take place
4. Standardisation of questions allow for measurement and comparison between responses
5. Findings can be replicated

### Types of questions

Individuals might answer a series of yes/no questions or might produce a great deal of information about what the person thinks or feels. Questions can be open or closed, be answered face-to-face, by post or even by telephone.

- **Closed questions** require a yes/no or agree/disagree answer. For example, "Would you vote for this candidate?" Yes/No  
*Closed questions produce quantitative data.*
- **Open questions** lead to more detailed, individual answers. For example, "What roles do you think males and females should perform in the home?"  
*Open questions produce qualitative data*

### Is a Questionnaire Appropriate?

It is necessary to consider whether a questionnaire is the most appropriate method to use for the research. It will therefore be necessary to assess the strengths and weaknesses of questionnaires.

### Advantages of questionnaires

- Large numbers of people can be tested this way.
- It is an inexpensive and quick method.
- It is an effective measure as it can produce (a) quantitative data (numbers) or (b) qualitative data (statements of feelings/thoughts).
- A lack of face-to-face contact with a researcher can provide honest answers.
- The questions asked are standardised and therefore a questionnaire can be replicated to check for reliability. This means that a second sociologist can repeat the questionnaire to check for reliability. Therefore, a second sociologist can repeat the questionnaire to check that the results are consistent. If the results are consistent then they can be seen as **reliable** or accurate

### Disadvantages of questionnaires

- Questions are set by the sociologist and so might 'impose' their biases onto the research.
- The questions used might simplify important issues by reducing thoughts and feelings to a 'tick box' answer.
- People might interpret the same question differently; one person's 'strongly agree' might be very different to another's.
- Unambiguous questions are difficult to devise. This leads to bias, which can lead a participant in a response or cause offence.
- A socially desirable response may be given. Anonymity can help in avoiding this.
- Participants may join in because they have a special interest in the topic of research. This is another source of bias and can constitute a "self-selected" sample. For generalising the research, the type of sample of participants selected is most important.
- There may be low rates of return when the questionnaire is given or posted to participants.

**Constructing a questionnaire**

There are 6 basic steps that can help when planning a questionnaire:

**1. Decide what information is needed**

It is important to be clear about what information is needed. For example, in a questionnaire based upon male and females views on coursework, what information is relevant and what is not? The gender of participants is obviously important but is age important?

**2. Decide the type of questionnaire to be used**

This will depend upon what is to be found out (closed or open questions).

How will the questionnaire be used -whether the researcher will conduct the questionnaires or whether the questionnaire will be self-administered. Questionnaire need to be simple to use and easy to understand.

**3. Write a first draft of the questionnaire and conduct a pilot study**

Sociologists use a pilot study, which is a small scale trial run before the main research; it is a feasibility study. The pilot study allows the researcher to check whether the chosen method of gathering data is appropriate? The researcher will be particularly keen to check the wording of questions in order to ensure that they are clear and straightforward. The pilot study helps to overcome potential problems that may otherwise occur in the main study. The pilot study may save time, money, and effort in the long run

**4. Examine the answers to the pilot study and edit the questions**

It is important to identify if any questions were difficult to answer as ambiguous and leading questions may affect the overall findings

**5. Prepare your final questionnaire**

Careful preparation of the questionnaire is needed to ensure validity (measure what it is suppose to) and reliability (obtain consistent results)

**6. Administer the questionnaire**

How is the questionnaire to be given to the participants?

It may be sent by post or email or it may be handed to participants. Which is the most convenient way and which is likely to get most results?

**Exam Hint:** For the 'A' level coursework you should use closed questions wherever possible as they will provide quantitative data which is easier to collate and analyse.

**Constructing closed questionnaires**

- Questions must be clear and specific and must be relevant to the topic being researched.
- Clear instructions for how to answer the questions must be given e.g. 'circle/tick the appropriate box to indicate your answer'. It doesn't matter which method is used as long as it is clear.
- People could also respond on a scale rather than just giving a yes/no answer.

| Very Good | Fairly Good | Good | Not very good | Poor |
|-----------|-------------|------|---------------|------|
|           |             |      |               |      |

**Be careful**

- To avoid ambiguous questions which could have more than one meaning or cannot be understood by participants
- To avoid overlapping questions  
e.g. How many cigarettes do you smoke a day?  
5 or less,  
5-10,  
10-15.  
Which box would participants tick if they smoke 5 a day?
- To avoid using abbreviations which may not be understood
- To include all options in the answers e.g. if participants smoke 20 a day, they could not give an answer.
- If including a category 'other', leave a space for participants to specify their answer
- To include clear routing instructions directing participants to different questions depending on their answer. This reduces the chances of respondents being faced with questions which do not apply to them, becoming frustrated with the questionnaire, and not returning it.

**Coursework Hint:** Care must be taken when constructing questionnaires. A questionnaire is merely a tool for gaining particular information from an individual or group. The construction of appropriate questions must be carefully considered. The results of a survey which has used a questionnaire will be unreliable if the questionnaire is poorly constructed.

**Summary**

- Questionnaires are a useful way of obtaining information from large numbers of people.
- They are quick, efficient and inexpensive to administer.
- Closed questionnaires allow the collection of quantitative data which is easier to analyse than qualitative data.
- Avoid ambiguous/leading questions when designing the questions or the results become difficult to interpret.
- Finally, ethics are important! Participants may not be fully informed about the purpose of the questionnaire in order to gain unbiased opinions. A statement informing participants of what they have involved themselves in needs to be provided, as does a statement about withdrawing from the survey if the participant so wishes. It is also important to make a statement about confidentiality

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**Check your Knowledge!**

1. Define what a questionnaire investigates.

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2. What is the difference between qualitative and quantitative data?

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3. What type of data is produced from closed questions?

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4. Identify two advantages and two disadvantages of using questionnaires.

1. ....  
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2. ....  
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5. What is a pilot study and why is it important?

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6. Identify two different sampling techniques

1. ....  
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2. ....  
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