

ScWk 298
September 28, 2009

Review of Instrumentation; Asking Questions; Qualitative Data Collection

I. Closed vs. open-ended questions

A. **Closed-ended:** “To what extent were you satisfied were you with the support group?” Likert scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (highly satisfied)

1. Use labels for all attributes whenever possible
2. Make labels consistent, e.g. *what’s wrong with this one:*

- 1=very dissatisfied
- 2=somewhat dissatisfied
- 3=somewhat satisfied
- 4=very happy with group

3. Make sure the question matches the label. *What’s wrong with this one:* “To what extent were you satisfied were you with the support group?”

- 1=very unhappy
- 2=somewhat unhappy
- 3=somewhat happy
- 4=very happy

B. **Open-ended:** “Tell me about your experience with the support group.”

1. *What’s wrong with this one:* “Were you happy with the support group?”
2. *What’s wrong with this one:* “Tell me about your experience with the support group and if it was helpful.”

II. What is a semi-structured interview? A semi-structured interview uses a combination of closed- and open-ended questions.

A. First question: “To what extent were you satisfied were you with the support group?” Likert scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (highly satisfied)

B. Next question: “Tell me why you picked ____ {answer}.”

III. “Should I use an existing instrument, or develop my own questions?” Answer: *Use an existing instrument whenever possible.*

A. Discuss validity of instrument in “Measurement and Variables” section, especially if you plan to use a total score as your variable.

1. Validity of questions’ meaning
2. Extent of inter-correlation of questions (e.g. are questions addressing “depression” correlated with each other and differentiated from questions addressing “anxiety”)
3. Is total score valid?

B. This might also be covered in your literature review. If so, no need to repeat it in the Methods section. (But you would have to mention the instrument’s measurement qualities in the Measurement and Variables section, e.g. “...the dependent variable will be the total score from the”“Cohen Research Anxiety Scale.””

C. Avoid using only part of an instrument, unless it was designed to be broken up. If you do use part of an instrument, discuss your rationale and whether or not it affects the questions’ validity.

D. When using an existing instrument, avoid developing your own scoring system. “But what if the instrument doesn’t have a scoring system?” Answer: *use each question as a separate variable.*

E. If the existing instrument has no history of validity testing, state this as a limitation.

IV. “I’m going to write my own questions...” That’s ok.

A. Only ask a question if there’s a good reason:

1. Question will help you describe your sample for the Methods section
2. Question represents a variable
3. Question can elicit a potential theme
4. Don’t ask for demographic information if you’re not going to use it!

B. Think about your Analysis Plan as you write the questions. (You should already have decided on the variable’s level of measurement.) For quantitative questions it’s often helpful to set up your spreadsheet or SPSS file ahead of time.

C. Avoid creating a total score summary variable for new, untested questions or instruments

D. Remember—each question is a variable.

E. Build in time to pilot test your questions with peers or (better yet) representatives of your study population.

1. Does the question make sense?
2. Are the language and wording suitable for study population?
3. Do the instructions make sense for the interviewer (or the participant, if self-response)?

4. If the question is scaled (e.g. choose from 1 to 5) do the choices make sense?
5. For a group of questions, does the order make sense?
6. Are the questions feasible to administer and score?

F. For newly written questions, always include the following study limitation: “One limitation of this study is that the newly written questions were not tested for validity and reliability beyond the basic pilot testing.”

V. Qualitative Data Collection

A. Method driven by approach

1. Narrative – historical explanation of a person’s life. Individual interview, e.g. “Tell me how you were successful in your career...”
2. Phenomenological – Shared experiences. More than one person interviewed, e.g. “Tell me about your experience being a social worker with sexual offenders...”
3. Ethnographic – More than one person interviewed; a culture-sharing group, e.g. “What do you have in common with other staff who work on the sexual offender unit?”
4. Grounded theory – building a theoretical explanation, e.g. “What is your explanation of why this particular treatment approach to sexual offending should work?”
5. Case study – a ‘bounded system’ that can be described by multiple types of data, e.g. in a case study of a sexual offender forensic residential program, interviewing staff, residents and community neighbors, reviewing charts, summarizing treatment statistics, and analyzing art work of residents and staff.

B. “How much should the themes be pre-determined in order to develop my questions?”

1. “Hard core” qualitative researchers say you should avoid making assumptions about themes ahead of time (so for them the lit review should not overly influence the researcher in this way)
2. However, most qualitative researchers today are more pragmatic about this and use the following schema:
 - a) Pre-determined themes derived from the literature or from anticipated findings. *Does your research confirm these themes?*
 - b) Themes derived from the nature of the participants, community, or treatment setting, e.g. themes about acculturation, treatment program procedures, etc.
 - c) Unanticipated, new themes discovered from the analysis. *This should be your ultimate objective, and what makes qualitative research so interesting.*