

Problems with Questions: Thinking Critically about Questionnaire Items

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Pastoral care research most commonly elicits data by means of questions posed to subjects. These questions embody the overall concepts and intent of a study and are the foundation upon which the value of results rests. However, items on a research questionnaire can be problematic in many subtle ways. Below are examples pertaining to individual questions. (Note: Questions can also play upon one another in sequence to create an overall effect, leading the responder or in some way skewing the data gained from the responses.)

Social Expectation Bias — Example: the question, "Do you believe in God?" may play into a bias in society that it is better to believe in God than not to, with the result being that responses may be skewed as some people simply give what they think may be the socially preferable answer. Multiple-choice formats can exacerbate this dynamic: in the case of asking subjects to agree or disagree with the statement, "I believe in God," there may be an especially strong inclination to avoid disagreement.

Compound Question Ambiguity — Example: the question, "Do you believe that God hears your prayers and answers them?" is actually two questions, making a single answer potentially problematic.

Concept Ambiguity — Example: in the question, "Do you believe in life after death?" the phrase *life after death*, may be commonplace, but it is theologically complex, encompassing a number of different ideas—an immediate "heaven" or an eventual "rapture," to name just two from Christian theology. And, if someone answered "yes," thinking of "living on only in the hearts and minds of loved ones," would this answer fit with the researcher's intention in asking the question? There may be some concept ambiguity in any question, but researchers should strive to ask questions that minimize this problem.

Cultural Concept Bias — Example: while religiosity was for many years assessed by asking, "How often do you attend church?" the question is problematic for anyone for whom the word *church* is not culturally appropriate.

Unintentional (Implicit) Dogma — Example: in the question, "Do you believe that God graciously answers prayers?" the word *graciously* is not only culturally rich but may be tied to a specific theology of grace. If such is not intended in the question, it may evoke more than a response that speaks precisely to the subject of the inquiry.

Unnecessary Add-Ons — Example: in the question, "Do you believe that God is actively involved in His creation?" the word *His* potentially interjects issues of divine gender that could distract some responders. Unless such is the intention of the question, leaving out this add-on word would seem still to preserve the basic question.

Offensive Wording — Example: in the question, "Do you believe in God?" the last word here could be taken with offense by responders who, for instance, believe it inappropriate to write out the name of the divine (—such as with the practice of many adherents of Judaism who write the divine name only as G-d [which is noted humbly by the writer of this guide as a further example of the complexity of language across lines of religious and cultural diversity]). Also, a lack of capitalization of words like *god* and *scripture*, as well as pronouns with divine antecedents, is sometimes a source of offence in religious questionnaires. Offensive wording does not mean only scatological language, but any wording that produces such a strongly distracting response from the intent of a question.

Off-the-Mark Wording — Example: in the question, "Do you believe in God?" the written word *God* may be acceptable yet so evidently off-the-mark as to be a distraction, for instance if this question was directed at Muslim subjects used to seeing the word *Allah*.

Jolting Language — Example: in the question, "Do you believe that God helps even despicable people?" the word *despicable* seems over-the-top. Unless such jolting language is intentional, researchers should strive to construct questions that have an even flow in their reading.

Process Modality Mismatch — Example: in the question, "What are, in order of importance, your five deepest feelings about God?" responders are asked to engage emotional material in an intellectual way (i.e., through prioritization). The process modality for answering this question may interfere with the responder's ability to engage the material: the responder may feel stretched in different directions, and in this case the likely result would be a response that muses *about* feelings rather than one that deeply *engages* them. Another—and common—example can be found in questions that pose abstract, hypothetical and conditional scenarios about emotionally sensitive issues, such as, "If you were told that you had only a month to live, do you think you would attend religious services more frequently?" Our human capacity to imagine the practical consequences of the condition set out in this question makes suspect the value of any response except as an indication of one's capacity itself to imagine the effects of being told that death was only a month away.

Inadequate Specificity — Example: the question, "Is prayer important?" does not specify whether what is being asked concerns a personal, social, or essential quality of prayer. Just as some questions can be unintentionally exclusive, others can be too broad.

Intrusiveness Concerns — Example: the question, "What do think has been your greatest sin?" probably touches too intimate a subject to expect frankness from a responder, even with precautions for confidentiality. An enduring difficulty in pastoral care research revolves around the intimate nature of people's spiritual lives. Even careful inquiry can seem intrusive to some.

Abstruse Wording — Example: the question, "Do you believe that a transcendent entity affects you in the deepest of places?" may be a well-intentioned attempt to find the most inclusive language, but along the way the question may lose the responder through unfamiliar, poetic wording. Sometimes the limits of language cannot be practically avoided, and a more complex means of questioning (e.g., using multiple questions or including explanations of meanings) is necessary.

Reading Level: Vocabulary — Example: in the question, "What's your understanding of your personal relationship to God?" there are two four-syllable words that may be beyond the reading level of many in the general population. In fact, the inclusion of a three-syllable word and a contraction may be problematic for some responders. The literacy of those who write questionnaires often blinds researchers to the many people who struggle to read at a sixth grade level. Researchers should, as a rule, choose the clearest and simplest possible wording in questionnaires (but never convey a tone of condescension).

Reading Level: Syntax — Example: in the (ludicrous) question, "Do you, who, of course, may or may not believe in God, believe in heaven?" the problem with syntax is obvious, but researchers should in general be careful of qualifying clauses that may be intended to clarify but which nevertheless can be confusing. Diagramming sentences is a good test here: the further one moves from a simple subject, verb, and predicate the greater may be the risk of losing the responder.

Print Reading Issues: Font and Size — A note here about printed questionnaires: fonts should be clear enough to be read by someone with poor, unaided vision—usually 14-point type is sufficient, and generally sans-serif fonts (like Ariel font) are easier to read than serif fonts (like Times). It is important to remember that the circumstances of illness can diminish a person's capacity to read, be it through the illness itself, the fatigue caused by illness, or medication; so normal 12-point type can become as strenuous to read as extremely tiny type