Problems with Questions: Thinking Critically about Questionnaire Items

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Spirituality research often 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 any results rests. However, items on a research questionnaire can be problematic in many subtle ways. Below are examples pertaining to the construction of individual questions, but keep in mind also that items on a questionnaire may play upon one another *in sequence* to create an overall effect upon a responder (for instance: take the first two questions below, in order, to see how the first may influence a response to the second).

Rhetorical Bias — Example: "Can you imagine not believing in God?" The question is not effectively about the imagination of the responder; it largely prompts a specific valuation. Rhetorical bias usually turns on cultural conventions and sometimes can be difficult to predict for different populations.

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 do so, with the result being that responses may be skewed, as some people may simply give what they think the socially preferable answer may be. Multiple-choice formats can play into this dynamic, depending on the order of the choices. This construction may not be as obviously leading as Rhetorical Bias, but it can affect data significantly.

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.

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 traditional practice of Judaism in writing the divine name in English only as G-d). 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 necessarily mean scatological language, but any wording that produces a sense of disrespectfulness or sacrilege.

Off-the-Mark Wording — Example: in the question, "Do you believe in God?" the written word *God* may be acceptable yet evidently off-the-mark so as to be a distraction (for instance: if this question was directed at Muslim subjects used to seeing the word *Allah*). This may be a less a problem than Offensive Wording or Cultural Concept Bias, but it can still affect responses (and be a good reason for validity/reliability testing).

Jolting Language — Example: in the question, "Do you believe that God forgives people who commit despicable acts?" a word like *despicable* would seem to go beyond a mere qualifier and carry an emotional impact. Unless such jolting language is for some reason intentional, researchers should strive to construct questions that have an even flow in their reading.

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.

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, like 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, especially about religion, but researchers should strive to ask questions that minimize this problem.

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. Questions should be as economically worded as possible.

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 narrow, others can be too broad.

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

Abstruse Language — 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 inclusive language, but along the way the question may lose the responder through unfamiliar or poetic wording. Sometimes the limits of language cannot practically be avoided, and a more complex means of questioning (e.g., using multiple questions or including explanations of meanings) is necessary.

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 to *imagine* the effects of being told that death was only a month away.

Intrusiveness Concerns — Example: the question, "What do think has been your greatest sin?" probably touches on too intimate a subject to expect frankness from a responder, in spite of precautions for confidentiality. An enduring difficulty in spirituality research revolves around the intimate nature of people's spiritual lives. Even a very careful inquiry can seem intrusive to some, triggering defensiveness and affecting the data collected.

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 stumbling blocks for some readers. 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 for questionnaires (but never convey a tone of condescension).

Reading Level: Syntax — Example: in the question, "Do you, whether or not you believe in God, believe in heaven?" the complexity of the syntax can be distracting or confusing. Researchers should generally minimize qualifying clauses that may be intended to clarify but which nevertheless can be troublesome. 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 or largely unaided vision—usually 14-point type is sufficient, and generally sans-serif fonts (like Ariel) 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 under normal, healthy circumstances.