Developing questionnaires and interview techniques on the standard of living and quality of life – teaching and practical approaches

Grațiela Ghic *, Claudia Gabriela Bentoiu, Alexandra Moraru

Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University, Faculty of International Business and Economics, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

The standard of living and the quality of life are two concepts of great complexity, which are interpreted with the help of questionnaires that are especially prepared for this purpose. The list of elements making up the questionnaire is strictly established, as each questionnaire points to a clearly determined number of dimensions regarding the two concepts. The simpler it may seem, the more complex is the realization of a questionnaire. Even if the methods of organising surveys or various sample plans, etc. represent inside paperwork, another part of the surveys is developed on the field. Therefore, after planning and conceiving the concept survey, we have to accomplish the field survey. The switch to field work requires greater involvement of operators in conducting surveys, as they start dealing with a questionnaire. Generally, successful completion of a survey depends on how the questionnaire is prepared, as well as on the way it is used in the field.

1. Introduction

Generally, successful completion of a survey depends on how the questionnaire is prepared, as well as on the way it is used in the field. Of great importance in the composition of a questionnaire is the manner in which questions are formulated, their order, or their character. Thus, questions with multiple meanings will generate inconclusive answers. For instance, questions like: "do you think ...?" Will produce distortion and vague questions will be answered vaguely. Preparation of questionnaires should be a concern when planning surveys, as it leads to disputes and critical analysis.

There are certainly some general principles that determine the formulation of questions, which are designed to prevent certain ambiguities. However, a good questionnaire is the result of more common sense than science, and that is because, for every question there are several formulations that are theoretically possible. If two formulations of the same question give different results, it is often difficult or even impossible to appreciate which result is the correct one, or if both are incorrect.

* Corresponding Gratiela Ghic. Tel.: +40-072-324-3537
E-mail address: grati.ela@alternativeit.ro
2. Methods and results

When preparing a questionnaire on the standard of living and quality of life, it is essential to avoid questions that have no direct connection to the survey topic. For example, if the topic is the average income per person in a household, we will be tempted to ask about the income source; if in addition they include salaries and secondary sources such as child allowances, scholarships, pensions, etc. the amount of information would be difficult to process. It is also essential to avoid drawing too detailed questionnaires, which are a source of unnecessary fatigue both for the operator and for the respondent.

A very detailed questionnaire will produce an increasing proportion of non-responses and distortions related to the subject, as well as anxiety on the part of the operator or unnecessary tension on the part of the respondent. Nevertheless, a short questionnaire shows the risks of leaving some unclear issues. That is why, in order to verify and set the number of questions, we may use pilot surveys which test the questionnaires’ content. Thus, we may correct the previous survey so as to establish the perfect number of questions, as well as their utility.

In compiling a questionnaire on the standard of living and quality of life another aspect is to be considered. This is to avoid questions to which respondents are not able to provide usable answers, either because they do not understand the question, or they refer to events that are too remote, or they are so intimate that the answer would be fatally doubtful. By examining each question that is to be included in the questionnaire, it is therefore necessary to make sure that the respondents have knowledge or have access to appropriate information. Too few people sincerely confess their ignorance, even if responding “I do not know”; and they do this, not because they consider themselves incompetent, but for other reasons: distrust, suspicion, or simply because they want to be left alone.

Other hesitations or incorrect answers may come due to embarrassing questions. For example, questions like, ‘How much do you earn?’, ‘Which is the structure of consumption?’, ‘How do you spend your free time?’ can be considered sometimes annoying but necessary in the study of living standards and quality of life. In this case, they must be carefully formulated so that the respondent is sure of the questionnaire confidentiality. This way, his or her answers and conclusions will correspond to reality without creating errors.

The questions of the questionnaire can be of several types. One of the first types of question regards the concrete facts and it is known as factual questions. Then there are questions about respondents’ opinions – questions of opinion. Some factual questions are called questions of "classification" and are particularly asked to gather information which may group responses according to the categories of respondents. For example, the question ‘how many people does your household include?’ allows us to group responses by household size.

Questions of "classification" are usually left at the end of the questionnaire. However, there is an exception with quota sampling. In the beginning, according to the tasks entrusted to the operator, any inquired person corresponds to the sample, but along the way it becomes increasingly difficult to find those that meet the purpose of data collection. Many of these people have to be rejected and it would be a waste of time if it was only at the end that we found out the other person does not meet the age or the socio-professional group. Therefore, in this case questions of classification must be placed at the beginning and not the end of the interview.

Nevertheless, the problems that arise in the case of opinion questions are more important. Among the several reasons regarding the importance of opinion questions, we may mention behavioural and attitude studies. And as we have to deal with social psychology, in the case of opinion questions there is no answer that can be considered uniquely correct. The answer we obtain will depend on the aspect that prevails in the respondent’s opinion, as well as on the question formulation or the contextual situation created by the previous questions.

For these reasons, the opinion research can use only two distinct methods of approach. The first one, which is the most common, attempts to estimate what proportion of the population agrees with every opinion; while the second one goes further, by trying to measure the intensity of the expressed opinions. The literature distinguishes between expressions of opinion, the first approach, and attitude measurement, the second approach.

In addition to the distinction between factual and opinion questions, a somewhat similar distinction is made between closed and open questions.

In the case of closed questions, all possible answers are fixed in advance and respondents must necessarily choose one of these answers. For instance:

a) What is your civil status?
   Married

   [ ]
This type of question is one that best fits processing in order to obtain the statistical indicators that interest us, and according to this, all the possible answers are identified so that they can lead to no ambiguity. The questions have to be comprehensible and easy to answer.

Thus, starting with the question:

*Do you have air conditioning at home?*

We may continue with the classification question:

*If you do, since when have you had it?*

- Less than a year
- Less than two years
- Less than three years
- ........................................
- For over ten years

We may also proceed to ask classification questions such as:

*If you do not have air conditioning, would you like to purchase one?*

- Yes
- No

In the case of open questions, the answer is not provided in the questionnaires and the respondent is free to express himself as he wishes. Thus, the questionnaire has to provide enough space for full expression.

For instance:

*Which are the most important aspects that you take into account when you assess the level of satisfaction with your life?*

If properly formulated, these open questions can provide valuable information on controversial subjects. They are required if the answers must be more explicit, but their analysis is more complicated than that of closed questions.

3. Conclusions

To conclude, the analysis of living standards and quality of life, particularly the complexity of these indicators and large area coverage of these requires the use of appropriate means of data acquisition from the perspective of using the results in sample door-to-door surveys aimed at studying the level of the living standard and the quality of life. According to these, we outline an extremely wide range of orientations, all having a common denominator and that is to address the issue of the two concepts according to their complexity.

References


