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Using questionnaires in qualitative human geography

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Abstract

This chapter deals with questionnaires, an information-gathering technique used frequently in mixed-method research that draws on quantitative and qualitative data sources and analysis. We begin with a discussion of key issues in the design and conduct of questionnaires. We then explore the strengths and weaknesses for qualitative research of various question formats and questionnaire distribution and collection techniques, including online techniques. Finally, we consider some of the challenges of analyzing qualitative responses in questionnaires, and we close with a discussion of the limitations of using questionnaires in qualitative research.

Keywords

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Chapter Overview

This chapter deals with questionnaires, an information-gathering technique used frequently in mixed-method research that draws on quantitative and qualitative data sources and analysis. We begin with a discussion of key issues in the design and conduct of questionnaires. We then explore the strengths and weaknesses for qualitative research of various question formats and questionnaire distribution and collection techniques, including on-line techniques. Finally, we consider some of the challenges of analyzing qualitative responses in questionnaires, and we close with a discussion of the limitations of using questionnaires in qualitative research.

Introduction

Qualitative research seeks to understand the ways people experience events, places, and processes differently as part of a fluid reality, a reality constructed through multiple interpretations and filtered through multiple frames of reference and systems of meaning-making. Rather than trying to measure and quantify aspects of a singular social reality, qualitative research draws on methods aimed at recognizing 'the complexity of everyday life, the nuances of meaning-making in an every-changing world and the multitude of influences that shape human lived experiences' (DeLyser et al. 2010, 6). (Within this epistemological framework, how can questionnaires contribute to the methodological repertoire of qualitative human geography? This chapter explores the possibilities.

Commonly in human geography, questionnaires pose standardized, formally structured questions to a group of individuals, often presumed to be a **sample** of a broader **population** (see Chapter 7). Questionnaires are useful for gathering original data about people, their behaviour, experiences and social interactions, attitudes and opinions, and awareness of events (McLafferty 2010; Parfitt 2005). They usually involve the collection of quantitative *and* qualitative data. Since such **mixed-method** questionnaires first appeared with the rise of behavioural geography in the 1970s (Gold 1980), they have been used increasingly to gather data in relation to complex matters like the environment, social identity, transport and travel, quality of life and community, work, and social networks.

While there are limitations to the qualitative data that questionnaires are capable of gathering, they have numerous strengths. First, they can provide insights into social trends, processes, values, attitudes, and interpretations. Second, they are one of the more practical research tools in that they can be cost-effective, enabling extensive research over a large or geographically dispersed population. This is particularly the case for questionnaire surveys conducted on-line where printing and distribution costs can be minimized (Sue and Ritter 2012). Third, they are extremely flexible. They can be combined effectively with complementary, more intensive forms of qualitative research, such as interviews and focus groups, to provide more in-depth

perspectives on social process and context. For instance, McGuirk and Dowling's (2011) investigation of the planning and development of masterplanned estates and the everyday lives of residents combined key informant interviews with planners and developers, questionnaires with local residents, and follow-up in-depth interviews with volunteers who had participated in the questionnaire. Data from the questionnaire provided a framework for the in-depth interviews, allowing key themes, concepts, and meanings to be teased out and developed (see Mee 2007, Askew and McGuirk 2004, for similar examples). In this mixed-method format particularly, questionnaires can be both a powerful and a practical research method. Showing these advantages, Beckett and Clegg (2007) report on the success of qualitative research into women's experiences of lesbian identity using only postal questionnaires to gather rich accounts from respondents. This process allowed respondents the privacy and time to consider and develop their responses to sensitive questions. The questionnaire as a research instrument, then, seems to have nurtured rather than constrained the data collection exercise.

Questionnaire Design and Format

While each questionnaire is unique, there are common principles of good design and implementation. Producing a well-designed questionnaire for qualitative research involves a great deal of thought and preparation, effective organizational strategies, and critical review and reflection, as an array of literature suggests (for example, de Vaus 2014 Dillman 2007; Fowler 2002; Gillham 2000; Lumsden 2005; see also the relevant chapters in Babbie 2013; Bryman 2012; Clifford and Valentine 2003; Flowerdew and Martin 2005; Hoggart, Lees, and Davies 2002; and Sarankatos 2012). The design stage is where a great deal of researcher skill is vested, and it is a critical stage in ensuring the worth of the data collected.

Notwithstanding the quality of the questionnaire devised, we are beholden as researchers to ensure that we have sufficient reason to call on the time and energy of the research participants. The desire to generate our 'own' data on our research topic is insufficient justification (Hoggart, Lees, and Davies 2002). As with any study, the decision to go ahead with a questionnaire needs to be based on careful reflection on detailed research objectives, consideration of existing and alternative information sources, and appropriate ethical contemplation that is attuned to the particular cultural context of the research (see Chapters 2, 6, and 7).

The content of a questionnaire must relate to the broader research question as well as to your critical examination and understanding of relevant processes, concepts, and relationships. As a researcher, you need to familiarize yourself with relevant local and international work on your research topic. This ensures clarity of research objectives and will help you to identify an appropriate participant group and relevant key questions. You need to be clear on the intended purpose of each question, who will answer it, and how you intend to analyze responses. You also need to be mindful of the limits to what people are willing to disclose, being aware that these limits will vary across different social and cultural groups in different contexts. Public housing tenants, for instance, might be wary about offering candid opinions about their housing authority. Respondents might be cautious about what they are willing to disclose in questionnaires administered via e-mail because of the loss of anonymity that occurs when e-mail addresses can be matched with responses (Van Selm and Jankowski 2006). Every question, then, needs to be carefully considered with regard to context and have a clear role and purpose appropriate to the social and cultural norms and expectations of the participant group (Madge 2007).

Begin by drawing up a list of topics that you seek to investigate. Sarantakos (2005) describes

the process of developing questions for a questionnaire as a process of translating these research topics into variables, variables into indicators, and indicators into questions. Identify the key concepts being investigated, and work out the various dimensions of these concepts that should be addressed. Then identify indicators of the dimensions, and use them to help you formulate specific questions. Doing this will ensure that each question relates to one or more aspects of the research and that every question has a purpose. De Vaus (2014) suggests that it is helpful to think about four distinct types of question content:

<CATCH num list>

1. *attributes*: Attribute questions aim at establishing respondents' characteristics (for example, age or income bracket, dwelling occupancy status, citizenship status).
2. *behaviour*: Behaviour questions aim at discovering what people do (for example, recreation habits, extent of public transport use, food consumption habits).
3. *attitudes*: Questions about attitudes seek to discover what people think is desirable or undesirable (for example, judgment on integrating social housing with owner-occupied housing, willingness to pay higher taxes to fund enhanced social welfare services).
4. *beliefs*: Questions about beliefs aim at establishing what people believe to be true or false or preferred (for example, beliefs on the importance of environmental protection, beliefs on the desirability of social equity).

<end list>

A guiding principle for question types, however, is to ensure that your target participant group will understand the questions and has the knowledge to answer them (Babbie, 2013). As is the case in newsprint journalism, it is recommended that unless you are targeting a specialized and homogenized group, you phrase questions to accommodate a reading age of approximately 11 years (Lumsden 2005). Rather than dumbing down your questionnaire, this tactic helps with clarity and direction. It also encourages respondents to answer the questions: for instance, a complex questions asking whether government planning policies contribute to local coastal degradation, may lead them to abandon the questionnaire.

Apart from the typology of question content, there is a range of question formats from which to draw. We commonly make a distinction between closed and open questions, each of which offers strengths and weaknesses and poses different challenges depending on the mode through which the questionnaire is being administered (e.g., mail, face-to-face, e-mail). **Closed questions** may seek quantitative information about respondent attributes (for example, level of educational attainment) or behaviour (for example, how often and where respondents buy groceries). You should provide simple instructions on how to answer closed questions (e.g., how many responses the respondent can tick). Some examples are set out in Box 10.1. Closed questions can ask respondents to select categories, rank items as an indicative measure of attitudes or opinions, or select a point on a scale as indicative of the intensity with which an attitude or opinion is held (see Sarankatos 2012, ch. 11). A major benefit of closed questions is that the responses are easily coded and analyzed, a bonus when interpreting a large number of questionnaires. Indeed, for web-based questionnaires, a data file can be assembled automatically as respondents type in their answers. Closed questions are demanding to design, however, since they require researchers to have a clear understanding of what the range of answers to a question might be. Respondents' answers are limited to the range of categories designed by the researcher, and this can be a

limitation. It has also been found that when respondents are asked to ‘tick all appropriate categories’ on a list (see the category list question in Box 10.1), they can turn to **satisficing behaviour**; that is, they keep reading (and ticking) until they feel they have provided a satisfactory answer and then stop. Relatedly, a significant limitation of closed questions is that they rest on the assumption that words, categories, and concepts carry the same meaning for all respondents, which is not always the case. For example, how a respondent answers the question ‘How often have you been a victim of crime in the past two years?’ will depend on what the respondent sees as a crime (de Vaus 2014). It is worthwhile to be aware, too, that the ways particular questions are posed or how they relate to preceding questions can influence respondents’ answers. Babbie (2013) shows that greater support in questionnaire surveys is indicated habitually for the phrase ‘assistance to the poor’ rather than as ‘welfare’ and for ‘halting rising crime rate’ rather than ‘law enforcement’. A further criticism of closed questions is that the loss of spontaneity in respondent’s answers and the removal of the possibility of ‘interesting replies that are not covered by the fixed answers’ (Bryman 2012, 250). This limitation might be overcome by offering an answer option such as ‘other (please specify)’ or by using **combination questions** that request some comment on the option chosen in a closed question (see Box 10.1).

In general, **open questions** have greater potential to yield the in-depth responses with the match the the aspiration of qualitative research: to understand how meaning is attached to process and practice. Open questions offer less structured response options than closed questions, inviting respondents to recount understandings, experiences, and opinions in their own style. Rather than offering alternative answers, which restrict responses, open questions provide space (and time) for free-form responses. Open questions also ‘give voice’ to respondents and allow them to question the terms and structure of the questionnaire itself, demonstrate an alternative interpretation, and add qualifications and justifications. This capacity acknowledges the **co-constitution of knowledge** by researcher and research participant (Beckett and Clegg 2007). For instance, Mee (2007) used open questions in her questionnaire-based research exploring public housing tenants’ experiences of ‘home’ in medium-density unit dwellings in Newcastle, Australia. Despite normative assertions that link ideas of home to home ownership and detached housing, respondents used the open-questions to describe their rented apartment homes as ‘heaven’, ‘a blessing’, and as ‘wonderful’ and ‘beautiful’. Open questions, then, are capable of yielding valuable insights, many of them unanticipated, and they can open intriguing lines of intensive inquiry in scenarios where extensive research is the main focus or where a more intensive person-to-person approach is not possible (Cloeke et al. 2004b). Such scope, however, means that open questions can be effort intensive for respondents to answer and time-consuming to code (Bryman 2013). An open format can also throw up responses that lack consistency and comparability. Certainly, respondents answer them in terms that match their interpretations. So open questions and the responses they yield are certainly more challenging to analyze than are their more easily coded closed counterparts (see Chapter 18). But welcome to ‘the rich yet ambiguous and messy world of doing qualitative research’ (Crang 2005b, 231)!

<CATCH insert Box 10.1>

Types of Questionnaire Questions

Closed questions

Attribute information

How often do you shop at this shopping mall? (please tick the appropriate box)

- Less than once a week
- Once a week
- Twice a week
- More than twice a week

Category list

What was the *main* reason you chose to live in this neighbourhood? (please tick the appropriate box)

- Proximity to work
- Proximity to family and friends
- Proximity to schools or educational facilities
- Proximity to shopping centre
- Proximity to recreational opportunities
- Environment
- Housing costs
- Good place to raise children
- Pleasant atmosphere of neighbourhood
- Other (please specify)

Rating

Please rank the reasons for buying your current house (please rank all relevant categories from 1 [most important] to 6 [least important]).

- Price
- Location
- Size
- Proximity to job/family
- Investment
- Children's education

Scaling

Please indicate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement (please tick the appropriate box):

- Having a mix of social groups in a neighbourhood is a positive feature.
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Grid/matrix question

Think back to when you first got involved in environmental activism. What initially inspired you to get involved? (please tick the appropriate box for *each* reason)

	<i>Very</i>	<i>Fairly</i>	<i>Not very</i>	<i>Not influential</i>
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	<i>influential</i>	<i>influential</i>	<i>influential</i>	
Spirituality/religious beliefs				
Fear/anxiety about ecological crisis				
Desire to change the world				
Nature/ecology experiences and care for the environment				
Political analysis				
Commitment to justice				
Felt like you could make a difference				
Influential person (please specify)				
Influential book/film (please specify)				
Key event (please specify)				
Contact with an organization, campaign, or issue (please specify)				
Outreach activities by an organization (please specify)				
Wanted to meet new people				
Want to learn new skills				
Sense of personal responsibility				
Other (please specify)				

Combination question

Have changes in the neighbourhood made this a better or worse place for you to live? (please tick the appropriate box)

Changes have made the neighbourhood better

Changes have not made the neighbourhood better or worse

Changes have made the neighbourhood worse

Open questions

What have been the biggest changes to the neighbourhood since you moved in?

What, if any, are the advantages for civic action groups of using the Internet, e-mail, and cellular phones?

Please describe and problem(s) you encounter using public transport.

<end CATCH>

In summary, using open questions makes it possible to pose complex questions that can reveal people's experiences, understandings, and interpretations of social processes and circumstances, as well as their reactions to them. Closed questions are not capable of such in-depth explorations. Answers to open questions can also tell us a good deal about how wider processes operate in particular settings. Thus, they enable research that addresses the two fundamental questions that Sayer (2010) poses for qualitative research: what are individuals' particular experiences of places and events? And how are social structures constructed, maintained, or resisted? (see Chapter 1). We would add the need to dissolve the idea of general processes into the messy contexts of everyday life.

Beyond choice of question content and type, getting the wording, sequence, and format of a questionnaire right is fundamental to its success. Guidance on these is given in Box 10.2 with discussion revolving around clarity, simplicity, and logic. In question wording, you need to be sure that questions are sufficiently precise and unambiguous to ensure that the intent of your question is clear and well communicated. It is advisable to be familiar with the vernacular of the participant group. In on-line contexts, this may include becoming familiar with the jargon, abbreviations, and grammatical rules commonly used within the on-line community being approached (for instance, the language styles of specific blogger or social media groups) (Madge 2007). Remember that the language of a questionnaire is not just textual. Graphical and numerical modes might also be present. These modes work together to affect respondents' perception of the survey and are perceived in ways that are influenced by cultural context (Lumsden 2005). The web's capacity for global reach also means that on-line questionnaires may target international participants, not all of whom communicate expertly in English. There are software programs that allow the researcher to convert a questionnaire written in English into other languages (see <http://www.objectplanet.com/opinio/howto/translation.html>) as well as commercial providers (e.g., QuestionPro; <http://www.questionpro.com/features/multi-lingual.html>). Beyond issues of logic, clarity, and comprehension, questions should avoid threats or challenges to respondents' cultural, ethnic, or religious beliefs, which may arise from a researcher's insensitivity, ignorance, or lack of preparation, even in the absence of overt prejudice. The need for concern about respondents' 'cultural safety' (Matthews et al. 1998, 316) is part of the researcher's broader ethical obligations.

<CATCH insert Box 10.2>

Guidelines for Designing Questionnaires

- Ensure questions are relevant, querying the issues, practices, and understandings you are investigating.
- Keep the wording concise (about 20 words maximum), simple, and appropriate to the targeted group's vernacular.
- Ensure that questions and instructions are easily distinguishable in format and font.
- Avoid double-barreled questions (for example, 'Do you agree that the Department of Housing should cease building public housing estates and pursue a social mix policy?').
- Avoid confusing wording (for example, 'Why would you rather not use public transport?'), and be alert to alternative uses of words (for example, for some people 'dinner' implies an evening meal while for others it implies a cooked meal, even if eaten at midday).
- Avoid leading questions (for example, 'Why do you think recycling is crucial to the health of future generations?'), and avoid loaded words (for example, 'democratic', 'free', 'natural', 'modern').
- Avoid questions that are likely to raise as many questions as they answer (for example, 'Are you in favour of regional sustainability?' raises questions of what sustainability means, how a region is defined, and how different dimensions of sustainability might be prioritized).
- Order questions in a coherent and logical sequence.
- Ensure the questionnaire takes no more time to complete than participants are willing to spend. This will depend on the questionnaire context (for example, whether it is conducted by telephone, face-to-face, or online). Generally, 20 to 30 minutes will be the maximum, although longer times (45 minutes) can be sustained if the combination of context and research topic is appropriate.
- Ensure an uncluttered layout with plentiful space for written responses to open questions.
- Use continuity statements to link questionnaire sections (for example, 'The next section deals with community members' responses to perceived threats to their neighbourhood.').
- Begin with simple questions, and place complex, reflexive questions or those dealing with personal information or sensitive or threatening topics later in the questionnaire.

<end CATCH>

The flow and sequence of the questionnaire are fundamental to respondents' understanding of the purpose of the research and to sustaining their willingness to offer careful responses and, indeed, to completing the questionnaire to its conclusion. Grouping questions into related questions connected by introductory statements will help here. In general, open-ended questions are better placed towards the end of a questionnaire, by which time respondents are aware of the questionnaire's thrust and may be more inclined to offer fluid and considered responses. In terms of layout, aim for an uncluttered design that is easy and clear to follow. Where you use closed questions, aligning or justifying the space in which the answer should be provided will contribute to clarity and simplify coding. With open-ended questions, particularly in hard copy, you need to be conscious of the need to leave enough space for respondents to answer without leaving so much as to discourage them from offering a response altogether.

All of these questionnaire design principles need to be observed regardless of how the questionnaire is being distributed: whether by mail, face-to-face, by telephone, by e-mail, or on-line. However, there are additional design factors that are important to consider when using an

on-line environment (Dillman 2007). Web-based questionnaire delivery makes it possible to incorporate novel features such as split screens, drop-down boxes, images, and sound tracks, although some of these features require powerful computers, particular software, and ample download time. You need to consider whether the participant group has the ability and the capacity to receive and respond to the questionnaire and its mode of delivery. Web surveys with advanced multimedia features, for example, have high bandwidth requirements (Vehovar et al, 2008). You also need to remember that on-line questionnaires require respondents to think about how to respond to the questionnaire while simultaneously thinking about technical options, a matter that is particularly important if your target participant group is less computer-literate. Keeping things simple and limiting the number of actions a respondent has to undertake is sensible. Finally, you need to take account of whether you will administer your questionnaire solely on-line or through other modes as well, in which case you need to be mindful of how questions will be posed in those other modes. Box 10.3 outlines additional key principles for the design of on-line questionnaires (adapted from Dillman and Bowker 2001).

Finally, whether developing a conventional or on-line questionnaire, you should include a cover or introductory letter or e-mail. Box 10.4 offers examples. The letter or e-mail needs to provide general information about the purpose of the questionnaire as well as information about confidentiality, how the respondent has been selected, how long the questionnaire will take to complete, and when relevant, instructions on how and when to return the questionnaire.

<CATCH insert Box 10.3>

Guidelines for Designing On-line Questionnaires

- Introduce web questionnaires with a welcome screen page providing basic instructions and information and encouraging completion.
- Ensure the first question is interesting to respondents, easily answered, and fully visible.
- Use conventional formats for questions, similar to those normally used on self-administered paper questionnaires.
- Provide clear instructions including technical advice on how to respond to each question, and position them at the point where they are needed.
- Limit the length of the questionnaire. The typical length of a paper questionnaire may seem excessively long when completed on a website where a typical print page can take up several screen pages.
- Keep the layout, colour, and graphics simple to aid navigational flow and readability and ensure the format is maintained across different browsers and screen set-ups.
- Allow respondents to move to the next question without having to answer a prior question.
- Allow respondents to scroll from question to question without having to change screen pages.
- If the number of answer choices exceeds what can be viewed in a single column on one screen, display choices as a double bank
- Include advice that indicates how much of the questionnaire the respondent has completed.
- Close with a thank-you screen page.

<end CATCH>

Sampling

Before administering a questionnaire, you will need to make a decision about the target audience, or sample. In quantitative research, questionnaires are used commonly to generate claims about the characteristics, behaviour, or opinions of a group of people ('the population') based on data collected from a sample of that population. The population might be, for example, tenants in public housing, the residents of a given local government area, or people living with HIV/AIDS. The sample—a subset of the population—is selected to be representative of the population such that the mathematical probability that the characteristics of the sample are reproduced in the broader population can be calculated (May 2011). In such cases, a list of the relevant characteristics of the population, the **sampling frame**, is required so that a sample can be constructed. A sampling frame might be, for example, the tenant list of a given public housing authority, a local electoral register, a health register of all people in a given geographical area receiving treatment for HIV/AIDS). The rules surrounding sampling are drawn from the central limit theorem used to sustain statistical claims to representativeness, generalizability, and replicability (see McLafferty 2010; Parfitt 2005).

<CATCH insert Box 10.4>

Examples of Invitations to Participate in Questionnaire Studies

Sample cover letter

School of Geography
Geography Building
East Valley University
Kingsland 9222
Telephone: (04) 89889778
Facsimile: (04) 89889779
E-mail: E.saunders@evu.edu.ca

High-density residential living in Port Andrew, East Valley

I am Edith Saunders, a research student with the School of Geography at the East Valley University. As part of my research on high-density residential environments in East Valley, I am investigating how people understand and create feelings of home in high-density neighbourhoods. The research is being conducted in collaboration with East Valley Council and is aimed at informing its policy and planning decision-making. The work is focused on the Port Andrew area, and you have been selected to receive this questionnaire as a local resident.

The questionnaire asks about the ways you understand and use your home and the ways you interact with your local neighbourhood spaces and services. The questionnaire will take approximately 30 minutes to complete, and completion is voluntary. The questions ask primarily about your experiences and opinions. There are no right or wrong answers. All answers will be treated confidentially and anonymously, and individuals will not be identifiable in the reporting of the research.

It would be appreciated if you could complete the questionnaire at your earliest convenience and no later than July 30. Please return the completed questionnaire in the reply-paid envelope provided. Return of the questionnaire will be considered as your consent to participate in the survey.

Your participation is greatly appreciated. Your opinions are important in helping to build

understanding of high-density residential living and how it can be supported through local government planning and provision of neighbourhood spaces and services. Questions about this research can be directed to me at the address provided. Thank you in advance for your participation.

Yours faithfully,
Edith Saunders

The university requires that all participants be informed that if they have any complaints concerning the manner in which a research project is conducted, it may be given to the researcher or, if an independent person is preferred, to the university's Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Unit, East Valley University, Postcode OG9222, telephone (04) 8988 1234.

Sample e-mail invitation to participate in an on-line questionnaire

From: kanchana.phonsavat@EVU.edu.ca
To: [email address]

Subject: Survey on high-density residential college living

Dear Student,

I am a research student with the School of Geography at East Valley University (EVU). As part of my research, I am investigating how students understand and create feelings of home in high-density residential college environments. The research is being conducted in collaboration with EVU and East Valley Council. You have been selected to receive this invitation to participate as a student resident of one of EVU's residential colleges.

We are interested in the ways you understand and use your college accommodation and the ways you interact with your local neighbourhood spaces and services. The questionnaire will take approximately 30 minutes to complete and is completely voluntary and confidential. The data will be used to evaluate university and council policies and their support of high-density residential environments.

To complete the questionnaire, please click on the following link:

<http://www.newurbanliving.evu.org.ca/surveys.html>

It would be great if you could complete the questionnaire in the next two weeks. If you have any questions or need help, please e-mail me at kanchana.phonsavat@EVU.edu.ca.

Thank you in advance for your participation.
Kanchana Phonsavat

The university requires that all participants be informed that if they have any complaints concerning the manner in which a research project is conducted, it may be given to the

researcher or, if an independent person is preferred, to the university's Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Unit, East Valley University, Postcode OG9222, telephone (04) 8988 1234.
<end CATCH>

On the other hand, questionnaires used in qualitative research are usually used as a part of mixed-method research aimed at establishing trends, patterns, or themes in experiences, behaviours, and understandings. Important to the analysis, then, is uncovering the influence of a *specific context*, rather than making generalizable claims about whole populations (Herbert 2012). A more appropriate sampling technique for qualitative research is **non-probability sampling** where generalization about a broader population is neither possible nor desirable. Sampling frames may not, in any case, be available. Some web surveys, for instance, involve self-selection by respondents where anyone who agrees to complete the questionnaire can be included in the sample. For example, Tomsen and Markwell's (2007) research into the perception and experience of safety at Australian gay and lesbian events included an on-line questionnaire. Respondents were invited to complete the questionnaire through targeted advertising in the gay and lesbian press, a media release, radio interviews, and providing information to 25 on-line chat groups and e-mail lists. A total of 332 people from across the country participated in the questionnaire. Specifically, **purposive sampling** (see Chapter 7) is commonly used where invitation to participate is made according to some common characteristic, be it a social category (for example, male single parents), a behaviour (for example, women who use public transport), or an experience (for example, victims of crime). There are no specific rules for this type of sampling. Rather, the determinants of the appropriate sample and sample size are related to the scope, nature, and intent of the research and to the expectations of your research communities.

As in all research, these considerations are overlain by resource constraints (time and money). Nonetheless, a lack of hard-and-fast rules and a need for pragmatism do not imply the absence of a systematic approach—quite the opposite. Complex and reflexive decisions need to be made about how to approach sampling. For instance, in research on what motivates 'sea-changers' to abandon city life and relocate to regional, coastal areas, researchers would need to take into account whether they should seek respondents in all age groups, all household types, and all income categories. Research on people living with HIV/AIDS would need to take into account whether the researchers should target, say, early-stage individuals only, both biological sexes, people of any sexual orientation, only individuals infected from a particular source, and so on. Each decision is liable to have ramifications for how sample recruitment proceeds and what mode of questionnaire distribution is suitable. Questionnaires administered on-line, for example, may be well suited to research on factors shaping environmental advocacy where the target respondents are likely to have web skills and access to computers as part of their work. By comparison, this mode of distribution may be poorly suited to research on perceptions of cultural displacement among low-income populations in gentrifying areas. These cases illustrate the importance of research scope, purpose, and intent in shaping the sampling approach and in determining appropriate sample size. Bryman (2012) provides details of various types of purposive sampling, along with a discussion of sample size, and Chapters 7 and 8 in this book provide an extended treatment of further questions regarding selecting cases and participants. In the end, decisions about samples are shaped by compromises between cost, need for targeting, the nature of the research, and the limits of possibility.

Pre-testing

You must try out a questionnaire before it is distributed. **Pre-testing** is when a questionnaire is piloted or ‘road-tested’ with a sub-sample of your target population to assess the merits of its design, its appropriateness to the audience, and whether it does in fact achieve your aims. For web-based questionnaires, rigorous testing of the questionnaire on a range of platforms and browsers should be undertaken to identify and weed out potential technical problems. In web-based contexts, technical bugs are very likely to result in respondents abandoning the questionnaire. Getting feedback from those with extensive questionnaire-design experience and from those who might use the data generated (for instance, in the example in Box 10.4, a local authority and a university) will allow possible problems to be identified and improvements made. Scheduling a pre-testing stage provides the opportunity for post-test revisions that might dramatically increase the questionnaire’s effectiveness.

Both individual items and the overall performance of the questionnaire need attention at this stage. Are instructions and questions easily understood? Would any of them benefit from the addition of written prompts? Do respondents interpret questions as intended? Do any questions seem to make respondents uncomfortable? Discomfort and sensitivity (perhaps the question is considered too intrusive) might be indicated by respondents skipping or refusing to answer a question or section. Alternatively, such outcomes could mean that respondents do not understand the question or do not have the knowledge or experience to answer it. Consider too how respondents react to the order of the questions. Does it seem to them that the questions flow logically and intuitively? Are there parts where the questionnaire seems to drag or become repetitive? Technical aspects can also be tested: Is there enough space for respondents to answer open questions? How long will the questionnaire take to complete? Do the data being generated present particular problems for analysis? If you plan to conduct the questionnaire face-to-face with respondents, the pre-test stage can also be a useful exercise in training and confidence-building.

Modes of Questionnaire Distribution

Consideration of the mode of questionnaire distribution should be one of the earliest stages of your questionnaire design. This has implications for design, layout, question type, and sample selection. The main distribution modes are mail, face-to-face, telephone, and the Internet-mediated modes of e-mail and the world wide web. Each mode has distinctive strengths and weaknesses, and our choice depends on the research topic, type of questions, and resource constraints. The best choice is the one most appropriate to the research context and target participant group, while the success of any particular mode is dependent on a design appropriate to context and participant group. So the question is: what should researchers interested in qualitative research be aware of to guide them in the choice of mode?

Mailed questionnaires have clear advantages of cost and targeted coverage. They can be distributed to large samples over large areas (for example, an entire country or province) at a relatively low cost. The anonymity they provide may be a significant advantage when sensitive topics are being researched—for example, those dealing with socially disapproved attitudes or behaviours, such as racism or transgressive sexual behaviour, or topics involving personal harm, such as experience of unemployment or crime. Respondents may also feel more able to take time to consider their responses if unimpeded by the presence of an interviewer. Clearly, too, the absence of an interviewer means responses cannot be shaped by how an interviewer poses a

question, interacts with the respondent, or interprets cues in the conversation in culturally specific ways.

Nonetheless, mailed questionnaires are generally the most limited of the three modes in terms of questionnaire length and complexity. The scope for complex open questions is particularly limited by the need for questions to be self-explanatory and brief, and this may be a significant consideration for qualitatively oriented research. Once the questionnaire is sent out, there is little control over who completes it or, indeed, over how it is completed; respondents may choose to restrict themselves to brief, unreflective, or patterned responses. A response to the question ‘what do you value about living in this community?’ might yield a response of several paragraphs from one respondent and the comment ‘friends and neighbours’ from another. There is no opportunity to clarify questions or probe answers. Nor is there control over the pattern and rate of response. Some parts of the target participant group may respond at a higher rate than others. It is common, for instance, for mailed questionnaires to achieve significantly higher response rates in wealthy neighbourhoods than in less socially advantaged neighbourhoods. Finally, mailed questionnaires can be subject to low response rates unless respondents are highly motivated to participate. Response rates of 30 to 40 per cent are considered good (Cloe et al. 2004b), although effective follow-up steps can increase a rate somewhat (May 2011).

Distributing questionnaires electronically is a recent variation on mail distribution and brings new potential for innovation and experimentation (Babbie 2013, 284).. There are three main means of electronic distribution: (1) sending the entire questionnaire to respondents as an e-mail attachment, (2) posting or e-mailing respondents an introductory letter with a hyperlink to a web-based questionnaire, and (3) distributing a general request for respondents (for example, via an on-line newsgroup) to complete a web-based questionnaire. You might also use a mix of these distribution strategies (Bryman, 2012, 672). A major benefit of electronic distribution is that it ‘compresses’ physical distance and expands enormously the reach of the questionnaire. Groups can be reached that are difficult to contact with paper questionnaires. These could include, for example, people with restricted mobility who might find it easier to respond on-line than to mail a completed questionnaire. Furthermore, people practising covert or illegal behaviours—for example, graffitiists or drug users—may be more easily recruited through the Internet. The Internet is also a powerful way of gaining access to self-organized groups—for example, those with common interests, lifestyles, or experiences organized into chat-rooms, newsgroups, and on-line forums. For example Banaji and Buckingham’s (2010) study on internet activism and young people sought out specific activist websites and conducted a questionnaire with 3000 users. Mailing lists or on-line newsgroups can be used for circulating the questionnaire or inviting participants to complete an on-line questionnaire. However, some groups are sensitive to the intrusion of researchers via mailing lists and newsgroups (Chen, Hall, and Johns 2004). Many discussion groups state their privacy policy when you join, so researchers should check the welcome message of public discussion lists for guidelines before using them to recruit potential participants (Madge 2007).

Regardless of the specific means of electronic distribution used, the recruitment of participants will be affected by the age, class, and gender biases that shape computer use, e-mail and on-line patronage (see Gibson 2003). For instance, online delivery of a questionnaire investigating the leisure habits of elderly people is likely to confront participation problems, given that elderly people are less likely to complete online surveys due to lack of internet access. Low income groups would similarly have restricted access (Babbie 2013, 283).

Other benefits of electronic distribution include cost-savings and efficiencies. Electronic

dissemination enables the use of p attractive formats and colour images without associated printing costs, although you should avoid overloading on-line questionnaires with cluttered design features or complex graphics that require excessive download time. Electronic distribution opens up opportunities for flexibility in question design, for more complex questions, for incorporating adaptive questions with encoded skip patterns (thus removing the need for complex instructions and filter questions), and for increasing the potential to generate rich and accurate qualitative data with fewer unanswered questions (Bryman 2012). Researchers who have deployed electronic distribution report lower response rates than conventionally distributed questionnaires; although rates can be comparable when pre-notification and follow-up e-mails are used (Fan and Yan 2010), Online respondents characteristically submit lengthy commentaries on open questions (Hoggart, Lees, and Davies 2002; Van Selm and Jankowski 2006), a plus for qualitative research. Apart from saving on print and postage costs, the electronic collection of data offers the major advantage over paper questionnaires of eliminating the need for a separate labour-intensive phase for data entry and coding of closed questions (Van Selm and Jankowski 2006).

Mailed and on-line questionnaires do, however, present a particular set of challenges surrounding hidden costs, ethical issues, and technical capacities and failures. The cost and labour savings of avoiding coding and data entry through electronic data capture can be offset by the costs of design and programming (Hewson et al. 2003). To run a web-based questionnaire, you need to be proficient in producing HTML documents, to use survey construction software packages, which can be costly, or to use the commercial services of a web survey host (see Sue and Ritter 2012). Costs can vary significantly. When it comes to ethical issues, obtaining informed consent, and managing privacy and confidentiality all present challenges (Vehovar et al, 2008). It can be difficult to obtain adequate online informed consent. In terms of privacy, the identity of web-based questionnaire respondents can be protected if they withhold their names, although technically adept researchers can collect data about web-based participants using, for example, user log files or Java Applets (Lumsden 2005; Bryman 2012). Anonymity cannot be provided to e-mail questionnaire respondents when the returned questionnaire attaches an e-mail address. Responses stored on computer files, and on-line, can be accessible to hackers, and this may be a particularly important concern if the study being conducted involves sensitive and personal data. Using encryption to increase the security of data during transfer and storage and backing up and storing data in a secure off-line location are advisable.

Qualitative research is often very effective if questionnaires are administered face-to-face, although this is a costly option. The major benefits of this mode flow from the fact that an interviewer's presence allows complex questions to be asked (see Chapter 9). As well, an interviewer can take note of the context of the interview and of respondents' non-verbal gestures, all of which add depth to the data collected (Cloke et al. 2004b; May 2011). As an interviewer, you can motivate respondents to participate and to provide considered, informative responses. Moreover, people are generally more likely to offer long responses orally than in writing. However, as Beckett and Clegg's (2007) work on lesbian identity suggests, this outcome is context-dependent. Perhaps more crucially, face-to-face questionnaires give an interviewer the opportunity to clarify questions and probe vague responses (see Chapters 9 and 10 for related discussions). For example, adding probes like 'why is that exactly?', 'in what ways?', or 'anything else?' can elicit reflection on an opinion or attitude. Long questionnaires can also be completed because direct contact with an interviewer can enhance engagement. The ability to pose complex questions and elicit more in-depth and engaged responses is a major benefit for

qualitative research. Moreover, this high level of engagement can also secure high response rates with a minimal number of nil responses and ‘don’t know’ answers (Babbie 2013). However, the level of interviewer skill and reflexivity required to secure optimal outcomes should not be underestimated.

As Kevin Dunn discusses more fully in Chapter 9, the presence of an interviewer can be a powerful means of collecting high-quality data, but it introduces limitations as well. Interviewer/respondent interaction can produce ‘interviewer effects’ that shape the responses offered. People filter their answers through a sense of social expectation, especially when interviewed face-to-face (Lee 2000). They may censor or tailor their answers according to perceived social desirability. That is, they may avoid revealing socially disapproved behaviours or beliefs (such as racism or climate change scepticism) or revealing negative experiences (for example, unemployment). Beckett and Clegg (2007) chose postal questionnaires specifically to ensure the *absence* of an interviewer. Their argument was that participants should be allowed to recount their stories in their own terms, without any identification with the researchers’ associations with particular geographical spaces or social and cultural attributes and without fear of judgment by the researcher. When interviewers are used, one means of dealing with respondents’ self-censoring is to incorporate a self-administered section in the questionnaire or to reassure respondents through guarantees of anonymity. Moreover, the interviewer’s presence (as an embodied subject with class, gender, and ethnic characteristics) can also affect the nature of responses given. For instance, Bryman (2012) suggests that the gender, ethnicity and social background of the interviewer can introduce significant variations. So while distinct benefits arise from using face-to-face distribution, there are drawbacks. Perhaps the most limiting is the practical consideration of cost. Interviewer-administered questionnaires are expensive and time-consuming and tend to be restrictive both spatially and with respect to population coverage. However, as we suggested before, this factor may not be a significant drawback if a particular, localized participant group is targeted.

While the opportunities for personal interchange are more restricted in telephone than in face-to-face questionnaires, the telephone mode still offers the possibility of dialogue between researcher and respondent and can provide some of the benefits of an actual face-to-face interview but with a level of anonymity that may limit problematic interviewer effects. Conducting questionnaires over the phone may encourage respondent participation because it may be seen as less threatening than opening the door to a stranger wanting to administer a questionnaire. However, telephone delivery constrains the scope for lengthy questionnaires, with about 30 minutes being the maximum time respondents are willing to participate (de Vaus 2014). Furthermore, because the mode relies on a respondent’s memory, the question format must be kept simple and the number of response categories in closed questions needs to be limited. However, the advent of **computer-assisted telephone interviewing** (CATI) and **voice capture** technology is significantly enhancing telephone questionnaires (see Babbie 2013, 281) and extending their potential. Moreover, they can be administered with great convenience and at relatively low cost.

Telephone questionnaires may rely on a telephone directory as a sampling frame, and this can introduce class and gender biases among respondents as well as ruling out people whose numbers are not listed. Moreover, as cellular phone use increases, landline directories are becoming less useful as a sampling frame. If telephone numbers are available for a selected group of people, this may not pose a problem. Historically, telephone surveys have had good response rates. However, growing public annoyance with unsolicited marketing calls means

approaches by telephone face rejection or screening by answering machines (Guthrie 2010; Dillman et al. 2009)

Maximizing Questionnaire Response Rates

Questionnaire response rates are shaped by the research topic, the nature of the sample, and the quality and appropriateness of questionnaire design as much as by the mode of distribution. In any case, questionnaire response rates tend to be higher when using a purposive sample—as is common in qualitative research—wherein interest in the research topic may be strong. There is good evidence that response rates for on-line questionnaires are stronger if the questionnaire is relatively brief, taking no longer than 20 minutes to complete, is not complex to complete, is simple in design, and does not require participants to identify themselves (Lumsden 2005). Regardless of the mode of distribution, response rates can be improved by undertaking a series of strategies before questionnaire distribution and as follow-up (Dillman 2007; Bryman 2012). Box 10.5 summarizes the strategies that enhance questionnaire response rates according to the different modes of distribution.

<CATCH insert Box 10.5>

Strategies for Maximizing Response Rates

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Face-to-Face</i>	<i>Telephone</i>	<i>Mail</i>	<i>On-line</i>
Ensure mode of distribution is appropriate to the targeted population and research topic.	√	√	√	√
Send notification letter (or e-mail pre-notification) introducing the research and alerting to the questionnaire’s arrival (or posting on-line).		√		√
Place newspaper or on-line advertisement in local community newspaper/magazines or on-line chat-rooms/newsgroups introducing the research and alerting to the conduct of the questionnaire.	√	√	√	√
Ensure questionnaire is concise.	√	√	√	√
Ensure appropriate location of approach.	√			
Ensure appropriate time of approach.	√	√		
Vary time if no contact is made	√	√		

initially.				
Pre-arrange time/location for conduct of questionnaire, if appropriate.	√	√		
Ensure reply-paid envelope is included in mail-out.			√	
Print questionnaire on coloured paper to distinguish it from introductory material or other mail.			√	
Send follow-up postcard/e-mail thanking early respondents and reminding others (about one week after initial receipt).			√	√
Send follow-up letter/e-mail and additional copy of questionnaire (two to three weeks after initial receipt).			√	√
Avoid abrasive manner.	√	√		
Dress appropriately to the target population.	√			

<end CATCH>

Analyzing Questionnaire Data

Analyzing questionnaires used in mixed-method research that blends qualitative and quantitative data requires an approach that distinguishes between closed questions in which responses are provided in an easily quantified format and open questions that seek qualitative responses. Quantitative data arises primarily from closed questions that provide counts of categorical data (for example, age and income bands, frequency of behaviour) or measures of attitudinal or opinion data (see Box 10.1 for examples). Questions such as these are relatively easy to code numerically and analyze for patterns of response and relationships between the variables that the questions have interrogated (May 2011). Indeed, as noted above, response categories can be pre-coded on the questionnaire, simplifying matters even further (see de Vaus 2014 for more detail), while data can be collected readily and easily collated within the electronic environment. The analysis of qualitative responses is more complex. The power of qualitative data lies in its uncovering of a respondent's understandings and interpretations of the social world, and these data, in turn, are interpreted by the researcher to reveal the understandings of structures and processes that shape respondents' thought and action (for elaboration, see Crang 2005b). Chapters 14, 18, and 19 discuss the techniques and challenges of coding and analyzing qualitative data in detail. Nonetheless, it is worth raising some important points specific to analyzing qualitative data arising from questionnaires.

In qualitative responses, the important data often lie in the detailed explanations and precise wording of respondents' answers. For qualitative research, then, it is best to go beyond classifying qualitative responses into simple descriptive categories so as to confine reporting to quantitative dimensions, stating, for example, that '49 per cent of respondents had positive opinions about their neighbourhood'. There are two problems here. First, such reporting may well be statistically misleading given they might have been derived from a relatively small purposive sample and could be used incorrectly to frame generalizations. Second, this approach involves 'closing' open questions so that the richness of how respondents constructed, in this example, their positive understandings and experiences of their locality, is lost. Certainly, classifying qualitative responses into descriptive categories allows us to simplify, summarize, compare, and aggregate data. Yet, in so doing, we should be careful not to forfeit the nuance and complexity of the original text which was collected as a qualitative exercise to help our understanding of the meanings and operations of social structures and processes and people's interpretations and behaviour in relation to them. Analysis is more attuned to the thrust of qualitative research will analyze questionnaire data gained by sifting and sorting to identify key themes and dimensions as well as the broader concepts that might underlie them (see the discussion of analytical coding in Chapter 18). Reporting findings in these terms is much more meaningful than falling back on awkward attempts at quantification.

Further, in analyzing qualitative responses, we need to be aware that qualitative research makes no assumption that respondents share a common definition of the phenomenon under investigation (be that quality of neighbourhood, experience of crime, understanding of health and illness, and so on). Rather, it assumes that variable and multiple understandings coexist in a given social context. We need to incorporate this awareness into how we make sense of respondents' answers. Indeed, one of the strengths of using questionnaires in qualitative research is their ability to identify variability in understanding and interpretation across a selected participant group, providing the groundwork for further investigation through additional complementary methods such as in-depth interviews.

Finally, keep in mind that qualitative data analysis is sometimes referred to as more of an art than a science (Babbie 2013) in that it is not reducible to a set of neat techniques. Although useful procedures can be followed (see Chapter 18), they may need to be customized to the distinctive concerns and structure of each questionnaire and the particular balance of quantitative and qualitative data it gathers. For this reason, and others, at all stages of the process of analysis we need to be mindful of engaging in critical reflexivity, especially when considering how our own frames of reference and personal positions shape the ways in which we proceed with analysis (see Chapters 2 and 19).

Conclusion

In seeking qualitative data, questionnaires aim not just at determining attitudes and opinions but at identifying and classifying the logic of different sets of responses, at seeking patterns or commonality or divergence in responses, and at exploring how they relate to concepts, structures, and processes that shape social life. This is no easy undertaking, and questionnaires struggle with the tensions of seeking explanation while being generally limited in their form and format to obtaining concise accounts.

Hoggart, Lees, and Davies (2002) argue that the necessarily limited complexity and length of questionnaires prevent them from being used to explain action (since this requires us to

understand people's intentions), the significance of action, and the connections between acts. Compared with the depth of information developed through more intensive research methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, or participant observation, questionnaires may provide only superficial coverage. Nonetheless, they go some way in the explanation in that they are useful for identifying regularities and differences and highlighting incidents and trends (see de Vaus 2014 for an extended critique). Indeed, as Beckett and Clegg's (2007) work shows, in some contexts they can enable the collection of full and frank, thoughtful and detailed accounts in ways that more intensive methods involving interviews and interviewers' presence may inhibit.

There are ways of constructing and delivering effective questionnaires that are largely qualitative in their aspirations, being mindful of the possibility of acquiring deep analytical understandings of social behaviours through careful collection of textual materials. Certainly, the interview, through its record of close dialogue between researcher and respondent, provides a particularly powerful way of uncovering narratives that reveal the motivations and meanings surrounding human interactions, and questionnaires can only ever move incompletely in this direction. However, by not requiring close and prolonged engagement with the research subject, the questionnaire offers opportunities to reach a wider range and greater number of respondents, in particular through on-line applications, and to collect data on people's lived experiences. This extensiveness and diversity makes questionnaires an important, contemporary research tool.

Key Terms

closed questions
co-constitution of knowledge
combination questions
computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI)
cultural safety
mixed-method research
open questions
population
pre-testing
probability sampling
purposive sampling
sample
sampling frame
satisficing behaviour
voice capture

Review Questions

1. Why are open questions more suited to qualitative research than closed questions?
2. Why is the choice of the mode of questionnaire distribution specific to the nature of the sample and the nature of the research topic?
3. Why should we avoid 'closing' open question responses for the purpose of reporting findings?
4. What are the limitations of the use of questionnaires for qualitative research?
5. What are the particular benefits of administering questionnaires on-line?

Exercise

Sydney, Australia, continues to experience population growth. As a counter to its sprawling suburbs, the city is building a new high rise urban community on old industrial land a few kilometres from the CBD. The new area is called Green Square. By 2030 it is expected to house 40,000 new residents and 22,000 new workers. The mayor, Clover Moore, says Green Square, "...is fast becoming a really great place to work, live and play."

Part A

Imagine it is now 2030 and the residents and workers are in place. Your task is to draw up a table that guides a research topic called, 'An investigation of positive social relations in Green Square.' The table should show, first, 5 variables that could be assumed to underpin positive social relations. Consider variables such as maintenance and care of the built environment, neighbourhood friendship networks, attitude to strangers, use of public space, vitality of social enterprises, viability of commercial recreational services (e.g. cafes). Then, second, your table should suggest 2 or 3 indicators for each of these variables. For example, indicators of a positive attitude to strangers might be demonstration of accepting gestures (say a smile or a nod), assistance rendered to someone unknown (say helping lift a pram across a kerb), or a feeling of calm in the presence of unknown shabbily-dressed people in a dark street.

Part B

- i. Select one of the variables from your table. Write an open question for each of the indicators you have nominated for this variable.
- ii. Select one of the other variables. Write a closed question for each of the indicators you have nominated for this variable.

Part C

Outline the methods you would use to analyse data collected from the questions you devised for Part B above.

Useful Resources

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Bryman, A. 2012. *Social Research Methods*. 4th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Cloke, P., et al. 2004a. *Practising Human Geography*. London: Sage. See Chapter 5.

de Vaus, D.A. 2014. *Surveys in Social Research*. 6th edn. Sydney: Allen and Unwin. See Chapters 7 and 8.

http://dism.ssri.duke.edu/survey_mode.php

Duke University's Initiative on Survey Methodology. An interdisciplinary initiative on survey methodology containing extensive tips and resources on survey research methods.

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See Chapters 10-13

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SurveyMonkey—The Monkey Team. n.d.. 'Smart survey design'.

s3.amazonaws.com/SurveyMonkeyFiles/SmartSurvey.pdf. SurveyMonkey's guide to effective design and question-writing for on-line questionnaires.

Box

Box 10.5

Reference List Updates

New or updated editions

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Mee, K.J. (2007) 'I ain't been to heaven yet? Living here, this is heaven to me': Public housing and the making of home in Inner Newcastle, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 24, 207-228

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McLafferty, S. (2010) 'Conducting questionnaire surveys', In N. Clifford and G. Valentine, eds, *Key Methods in Geography*, 77-88. London: Sage

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