

Qualitative Research Methods module: preparatory reading for the workshop in Week 4

Read this document carefully and bring it (electronically or on paper) to the workshop. Be ready to discuss the question:

How convincing (and why or why not) is the authors' claim that quantitative questionnaires may fail accurately to reflect informants' lived experiences, if designers impose their way of 'framing' such experiences on informants?

How Accurately can Questionnaires Designed for Quantitative Analysis Capture People's Experience?

Here is an example of research suggesting that informants' perceptions are integral to the process of supplying data for quantitative analysis. Completing a questionnaire is an interpretive process of interaction between the way informants construct their experience and the construction produced by the questionnaire designer.

Research conducted by Galanski and Kozłowska* suggests that informants' experience is too complex to be captured accurately by the pre-specified categories that questionnaires designed for quantitative analysis commonly employ.

* Galanski, D and Kozłowska, O. 2009. Questionnaires and lived experience: strategies of coping with the quantitative frame, *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, 7: 271-284.

The researchers investigated how informants interacted with the instrument items when completing a questionnaire that employed multiple-choice questions and Likert Scales to facilitate quantitative analysis. The researchers showed how informants struggled with the reality imposed on them by the items in the instrument, so the instrument failed accurately to offer an insight into the informants' experiences and emotions.

The empirical evidence was gathered from 20 informants, who had lost their job and were attending a job centre. They were asked to complete a widely used questionnaire designed to examine their feelings and behaviours about losing their job, and to 'think aloud' while doing it. The informants were found to employ three strategies for dealing with the restrictions imposed by the framing of the questionnaire: rejecting it, constructing their experience in a way that matched the instrument, or reformulating the questions to fit an aspect of their experience. The authors suggest that the context and content of experience are too complex for the categories of such instruments to reflect it accurately. The process of responding to items requires informants to interpret questions in trying to work out how these questions may apply to their own experience. The authors cast doubt on the potential of questionnaires designed for quantitative analysis to generate patterns that accurately reflect the complexity of informants' experience.

Here is an example of each of the three strategies that informants employed, as reported in the paper.

Rejecting the questionnaire (p277)

Extract 3 (EP, female, 48). EP comments on what emotions she felt when she found out about being laid off; the options were (a) anger, (b) fear, (c) despair, (d) rage, (e) regret, (f) joy, (g) terror, (h) some other emotions, what, on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *little*, 3 = *moderately*, 4 = *much*, and 5 = *very much*):

EP: ...you know, at this moment one feels regret, anger, rage, and everything. All together. One doesn't know on who to take it out on, one doesn't know whom the regret is directed at, and, finally, at oneself; I don't know how to tell you this, but I hated myself. Simply I condemned myself for everything, that ... that ... I had squandered everything. Because I could have done it earlier, sort it out earlier, and then everything accumulates so much and explodes inside.

The authors comment on the difficulty this informant experienced in having to try and fit her experience into one or more of the categories offered, and then how she expressed a complex emotion that the item did not allow for (self-hatred) on top of her other emotions: 'In the end, all these feelings are referred to as one dynamic "it" (arguably, there is no name for "it" – how could it be labelled then?) that is accumulating and finally bursting.'

Matching experiences with the categories supplied (p277-8)

Extract 4 (BB, female, 46). BB comments on what the loss of employment meant to her. The answers to choose from were (a) a tragedy, (b) release from unpleasant duties, (c) an indifferent event:

BB: It's hard to say. A release from unpleasant duties, perhaps not. Not quite so unpleasant. Definitely not an indifferent event. A tragedy? Also not quite. I didn't approach it like that then, that it is such a tragedy. I was convinced that sooner or later I would find [laughs]. So I don't know what I should underline. There is simply is no such option.

I: But mostly, which do you agree with?

BB: Well, none. Because as I said, neither an indifferent event nor release from unpleasant duties. 'Cause I was saying that I had full satisfaction in that job.

I: What do you mean satisfaction? What kind?

BB: Well, you had to show yourself as having certain skills in order to do the work well. And on time, because work was to deadlines, tragedy really sounds so. I have no choice, I cannot add anything. Definitely not release from unpleasant duties, because as I was saying, I don't feel well at home; despite that I am busy all the time, I miss something. No. I don't feel well as a skivvy. [laughs] Worse than in the firm where there were some quarrels with co-workers or the relationship with the boss was not going well, and because the work was tedious and as it was, one could find reason or satisfaction. A bit of a tragedy of sorts.

The authors comment on how informants tried to adjust their narrative of their experience to fit the frame of the instrument items. Informants either reinterpreted their experience to make it fit a category, or just selected any option.

Reformulating instrument items (p279)

Extract 7 (WL, male, 43). WL comments on the question of what he would be ready to do to get employment, and the answer options were (a) get better qualifications, and (b) change profession; other options were (c) taking a job on the black market,⁷ (d) I prefer a benefit, (e) other, what.

WL: And here I can mark these two, get better qualifications, and change profession.

I: Have you thought about something specific yet?

WL: I mean, just now, with this in mind, I was coming [here; i.e. to the job center] to change [my] profession, right? There just was a job offer, right? And I was just thinking about changing profession.

The authors comment that such informants reinterpreted the item as asking them about changing jobs, enabling them to formulate a response within the categories offered in which they could construct themselves positively as active job-seekers.