

Purpose

Answering even simple survey questions involves a complex thought process; understanding that process can help you write clearer questions and get more accurate answers

Key Points

- There are five steps of answering survey questions:
 - Understand the question
 - Recall the relevant information/attitudes
 - Count or estimate the relevant information/attitudes
 - Match the answer to the answers available on the survey
 - Edit the answer



What is the cognitive process of responding to survey questions?

There are five steps that people go through when answering survey questions. These steps happen very quickly. However, at each point ambiguity can enter into the answers.

1. Understand the question

Consider the following, very simple, survey question:
How many magazines did you read last week?

- What does “read” mean? Does it count if you skim the magazine? If you read a couple of articles? Or do you have to read the magazine cover to cover?
- What counts as a “magazine”? Does it mean only magazines that you might buy in a check-out line? Do tabloids count? What about newspapers? What about academic journals? Do magazines have to be in print or can you read them online?
- What counts as a “week”? Does it mean a Sunday—Saturday period? Or does it mean the past 7 days?

2. Recall the relevant information/attitudes

- People rarely count events unless the behavior or experience is memorable and rare.
- They will assume that recent events happened longer ago and long ago events happened more recently.

3. Count or estimate the relevant information

- Rounded numbers or numbers that fit with a particular time period usually indicate that the person estimated their answer.

4. **Match their answer to the answers available to choose from**

- They will then take the answer in their head and see where it fits in with the answers they are allowed to choose from.
- Respondents will assume that the middle of the scale is “average”. They will calculate their answer based on how much they think they are below, at, or above average.

5. **Edit their answer**

- Finally, when they record their answer they may edit it to give what they think is the socially desirable answer.

Understanding the thought process of responding to surveys can help you write clearer questions.

Recommended Resources

Fowler, F. J. (2009). Designing questions to be good measures. In *Survey research methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Reinharz, S. (1992). Feminist survey research and other statistical research formats. In *Feminist methods for social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sudman, S., Bradburn, N. M., & Schwarz, N. (1996). Methods for determining cognitive processes and questionnaire problems. In *Thinking about answers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Sudman, S., Bradburn, N. M., & Schwarz, N. (1996). Answering a survey: Cognitive and communicative processes. In *Thinking about answers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Thoresen, S., & Overlien, C. (2009). Trauma victim: Yes or No? Why it may be difficult to answer questions regarding violence, sexual abuse, and other traumatic events. *Violence Against Women, 15*, 699-719.