



Creating Valid Answer Categories

How do I know what answer categories to use when developing a closed-ended question?

There are two types of questions: open-ended questions and closed-ended questions. Each type has advantages and disadvantages.

Closed-ended questions provide a range of answer categories or options from which participants can choose. Open-ended questions provide no answer categories but allow the participants to express ideas in the language they choose.

Closed-ended questions are considered more efficient for both the respondent and you. Respondents experience less burden in completing closed-ended questions than open-ended ones, thus insuring you a greater response and less missing data. Research has shown specifically, that less educated audiences are less likely to complete open-ended questions. Additionally, you can tally questions with answer categories more quickly.

Here are some examples of questions that would be more efficient if you provided answer categories rather than leave them open-ended:

What problems have you faced in trying to initiate some of the recommendations made in the xyz program?

How might the xyz program be improved?

PROBLEM

The scientific challenge in developing a valid set of answer categories is to create categories that reflect a range of ideas or options so that each participant finds the answer that reflects his or her perspective, circumstances, or values.

AVOID

What you don't want to do is use a set of answer categories from another program evaluation since the objectives and design of every extension program are different. Questions and answer categories in program evaluation are not typically recyclable.

Also, do not make up a set of answer categories without input from the program participants. Research suggests that educators designing programs normally, cannot accurately perceive ahead of time, the full range of thoughts that participants have about the effects of the program e.g., the problems they incur trying to initiate change in their lives or on their farms. The list of answer categories that educators develop tends to be unrepresentative of the participants' views and only serves to confirm the frame of reference of the educator without even knowing it.

Then you might ask, "Should I always use the questions in an open-ended form with no answer categories?" The answer is a decided "No."



USE

To create a valid set of answer categories, take the following steps.

Step one: In the first few times you run a program, ask the question in its open-ended form, without answer categories.

Step two: When you think you have an array of responses that captures the full range of ideas from that target audience, synthesize and compile a list of answer categories. The value of these categories is that they are based on the *array of ideas expressed by the participants*. Use their language in an answer category if it clearly expresses an idea. Add an 'other' category and if another idea surfaces from this category, you could add it to the list of answer categories in the next program; typically however, the 'other' category will not yield much more information if you have garnered sufficient ideas from the open-ended questions.

The important point to remember is that an array of answer categories is more likely to be valid if it is *generated from the participants* initially using an open-ended question. These open-ended questions can be asked as a basis for developing answer categories in a survey but they could also be asked in a focus group or personal interview, whichever data collection method is more efficient or convenient.

For further reading see: Schuman, H. and Presser, S. (1996) Questions and answers in attitude surveys: experiments on question form, wording, and context. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

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