Self-reports: questionnaires and interviews

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Core ideas

Self-reports gather data directly from participants by asking them questions.

Questionnaires can collect data from many people efficiently, especially when questions are standardised.

Interviews allow follow-up questions and richer detail, but they take more time and may be affected by the interviewer.

Closed questions are easier to score and compare, while open questions can reveal more detailed answers.

Participants may give inaccurate answers because of social desirability, memory problems or misunderstanding questions.

Good self-report design uses clear wording, appropriate response options and ethical handling of personal information.

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Lesson 2.1.3 | AS research methodology

Key terms

Self-report: A method where participants answer questions about themselves.

Questionnaire: A written or online set of questions completed by participants.

Interview: A spoken question-and-answer method.

Closed question: A question with fixed response options.

Open question: A question that lets participants answer in their own words.

Social desirability: Answering in a way that seems acceptable or impressive.

Response bias: A pattern of answers that reduces accuracy.

Standardised question: A question asked in the same way to every participant.

Further detail and evidence

Questionnaires may use paper-and-pencil or online techniques. Both can contain open and closed questions; technique and question format are different decisions.

A structured interview uses a fixed set/order of questions; an unstructured interview develops flexibly; a semi-structured interview uses prepared questions with follow-up prompts. Interviews may be face-to-face or by telephone.

Questionnaire technique (paper/online), question format (open/closed), interview format (structured/semi-structured/unstructured) and interview technique (face-to-face/telephone) are separate decisions. State example wording, response options and how answers will be scored or interpreted.

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Lesson 2.1.3 | AS research methodology

Applying the ideas

A closed item might ask how many nights last week a person slept fewer than seven hours. An open item can ask what made sleep difficult. A structured interview asks the same prepared questions; a semi-structured interview can probe an unusual answer. Numerical scores and thematic descriptions can be combined.

Worked example: Choose either a questionnaire or an interview for researching exam stress, and justify the choice. A questionnaire would be suitable if the researcher wanted data from many students quickly. It could use closed rating-scale questions such as how often students feel stressed before exams, making answers easy to compare. A limitation is that students may underreport stress because of social desirability or because fixed options do not capture their full experience.

Worked example: Compare one strength of closed questions with one strength of open questions. Closed questions are useful because fixed options make answers quicker to complete and easier to score across many participants. Open questions are useful because participants can explain their views in their own words, giving richer qualitative detail. The best choice depends on whether the researcher values easy comparison or depth of response more.

Evaluation and connections

Clear wording avoids leading questions, double-barrelled items and unclear time periods. Pilot the questionnaire to check comprehension. Anonymous collection may reduce socially desirable responses but prevents some follow-up checks. Interviews allow clarification but may introduce tone, prompting or interviewer expectations.