10

Self-completion questionnaires

Chapter outline

Chapter guide

Questionnaires that are completed by respondents themselves are one of the main instruments for gathering data using a social survey design, along with the structured interview that was covered in the previous chapter. Until the Internet became a platform for administering questionnaires (see Chapter 28), probably the most common form was the mail or postal questionnaire. The term 'self-completion questionnaire' is often used because it is somewhat more inclusive than 'postal questionnaire'. This chapter explores:

- the advantages and disadvantages of the questionnaire in comparison to the structured interview;
- how to address the potential problem of poor response rates, which is often a feature of the postal questionnaire;
- how questionnaires should be designed in order to make answering easier for respondents and less prone to error;
- the use of diaries as a form of self-completion questionnaire.

Introduction

In a very real sense, the bulk of the previous chapter was about questionnaires. The structured interview is in many, if not most, respects a questionnaire that is administered by an interviewer. However, there is a tendency, which borders on a convention, to reserve the term 'questionnaire' for contexts in which a battery of usually closed questions is completed by respondents themselves.

Self-completion questionnaire or postal questionnaire?

The **self-completion questionnaire** is sometimes referred to as a **self-administered questionnaire**. The former term will be followed in this book. With a self-completion questionnaire, respondents answer questions by completing the questionnaire themselves. As a method, the self-completion questionnaire can come in several different forms. Probably the most prominent of these forms is the **postal** or **mail questionnaire**, whereby, as its name implies, a questionnaire is sent through the post to the respondent. The latter, following completion of the instrument, is usually asked to return it by post; an alternative form of return is when respondents are requested to deposit their completed questionnaires in a certain location, such as a box in a school common room or in a supervisor's office in a firm. 'Postal' is used rather than mail to distinguish questionnaires that are sent out through the postal system from email questionnaires, which are discussed in Chapter 28. The term 'self-completion questionnaire' also covers forms of administration, such as when a researcher hands out questionnaires to all students in a class and collects them back after they have been completed. For example, Smith and McVie (2003) describe their use of such an instrument for their longitudinal cohort study of crime in relation to transformations during youth and adolescent development among a large sample of young people in Edinburgh. They write:

> In general, questionnaires were completed by a whole class under the supervision of one or two researchers. . . . Desks were spaced out as much as possible, and in most cases questionnaires were completed in exam-like conditions, with talking strongly discouraged, and little or no overlooking of others' questionnaires. (Smith and McVie 2003: 183)

In this case, we can see that the questionnaire is self-administered but is neither sent out nor returned through the postal system. This might be described as a 'supervised self-completion questionnaire'. 'Self-completion questionnaire' is, therefore, a more inclusive term than 'postal questionnaire', though it is probably true to say that the latter is the most prominent form of the self-completion questionnaire.

In the discussion that follows, when points apply to more or less all forms of self-completion questionnaire, this term will be employed. When points apply specifically or exclusively to questionnaires sent through the post, the term 'postal questionnaire' will be used.

Evaluating the self-completion questionnaire in relation to the structured interview

In many ways, the self-completion questionnaire and the structured interview are very similar methods of social research. The obvious difference between them is that, with the self-completion questionnaire, there is no interviewer to ask the questions; instead, respondents must read each question themselves and answer the questions themselves. Beyond this obvious, but central, difference, they are remarkably similar. However, because there is no interviewer in the administration of the self-completion questionnaire, the research instrument has to be especially easy to follow and its questions have to be particularly easy to answer. After all, respondents cannot be trained in the way interviewers can be; nor do they know their way around a research instrument in the way a 'lone researcher' might.

As a result, self-completion questionnaires, as compared to structured interviews, tend to:

- have fewer open questions, since closed ones tend to be easier to answer;
- have easy-to-follow designs to minimize the risk that the respondent will fail to follow filter questions or will inadvertently omit a question;
- be shorter to reduce the risk of 'respondent fatigue', since it is manifestly easier for a respondent who becomes tired of answering questions in a long questionnaire to consign it to a waste paper bin rather than to terminate an interview.

Advantages of the self-completion questionnaire over the structured interview

Cheaper to administer

Interviewing can be expensive. The cheapness of the self-completion questionnaire is especially advantageous if you have a sample that is geographically widely dispersed. When this is the case, a postal questionnaire will be much cheaper, because of the time and cost of travel for interviewers. This advantage is obviously less pronounced in connection with telephone interviews, because of the lower costs of telephone charges relative to travel and time spent travelling. But, even in comparison to telephone interviewing, the postal questionnaire enjoys cost advantages.

Quicker to administer

Self-completion questionnaires can be sent out through the post or otherwise distributed in very large quantities at the same time. A thousand questionnaires can be sent out through the post in one batch, but, even with a team of interviewers, it would take a long time to conduct personal interviews with a sample of that size. However, it is important to bear in mind that the questionnaires do not all come back immediately and that they may take several weeks to be returned. Also, there is invariably a need to send out follow-up letters and/or questionnaires to those who fail to return them initially, an issue that will be returned to below.

Absence of interviewer effects

It was noted in Chapter 9 that various studies have demonstrated that characteristics of interviewers (and respondents) may affect the answers that people give. While the findings from this research are somewhat equivocal in their implications, it has been suggested that characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, and the social background of interviewers may combine to bias the answers that respondents provide. Obviously, since there is no interviewer present when a self-completion questionnaire is being completed, interviewer effects are eliminated. However, this advantage probably has to be regarded fairly cautiously, since few consistent patterns have emerged over the years from research to suggest what kinds of interviewer characteristics bias answers. Probably of greater importance to the presence of an interviewer is the tendency for people to be more likely to exhibit social desirability bias when an interviewer is present. Research by Sudman and Bradburn (1982) suggests that postal questionnaires work better than personal interviews when a question carries the possibility of such bias. There is also a tendency for respondents to under-report activities that induce anxiety or about which they are sensitive. Research summarized by Tourangeau and Smith (1996) strongly suggests that respondents tend to report more drug use and alcohol consumption and a higher number of sexual partners and of abortions in self-completion questionnaires than in structured interviews.

No interviewer variability

Self-completion questionnaires do not suffer from the problem of interviewers asking questions in a different order or in different ways.

Convenience for respondents

Self-completion questionnaires are more convenient for respondents, because they can complete a questionnaire when they want and at the speed that they want to go.

Disadvantages of the self-completion questionnaire in comparison with the structured interview

Cannot prompt

There is no one present to help respondents if they are having difficulty answering a question. It is always important to ensure that the questions that are asked are clear and unambiguous, but this is especially so with the self-completion questionnaire, since there is no interviewer to help respondents with questions they find difficult to understand and hence to answer. Also, great attention must be paid to ensure that the questionnaire is easy to complete; otherwise questions will be inadvertently omitted if instructions are unclear.

Cannot probe

There is no opportunity to probe respondents to elaborate an answer. Probing can be very important when open-ended questions are being asked. Interviewers are often trained to get more from respondents. However, this problem largely applies to open questions, which are not used a great deal in self-completion questionnaire research.

Cannot ask many questions that are not salient to respondents

Respondents are more likely than in interviews to become tired of answering questions that are not very salient to them, and that they are likely to perceive as boring. Because of the risk of a questionnaire being consigned to a waste paper bin, it is important to avoid including many non-salient questions in a self-completion questionnaire. However, this point suggests that, when a research issue *is* salient to the respondent, a high response rate is feasible (Altschuld and Lower 1984). This means that, when questions are salient, the self-completion questionnaire may be a good choice for researchers, especially when the much lower cost is borne in mind.

Difficulty of asking other kinds of question

In addition to ensuring that you do not ask too many questions that are not salient to respondents, as previously suggested, it is also important to avoid asking more than a very small number of open questions (because respondents frequently do not want to write a lot). Questions with complex structures, such as filters, should be avoided as far as possible (because respondents often find them difficult to follow).

Questionnaire can be read as a whole

Respondents are able to read the whole questionnaire before answering the first question. When this occurs, none of the questions asked is truly independent of the others. It also means that you cannot be sure that questions have been answered in the correct order. Also, the problem of question order effects (see Chapter 9) may arise. When the questionnaire is being answered in the context of a **Web survey**, it is possible to ensure that the respondent can view only a small number of questions at a time (Chapter 28).

Do not know who answers

With postal questionnaires, you can never be sure whether the right person has answered the questionnaire. If a questionnaire is sent to a certain person in a household, it may be that someone else in that household completes the questionnaire. It is also impossible to have any control over the intrusion of non-respondents (such as other members of a household) in the answering of questions. Similarly, if a questionnaire is sent to a manager in a firm, the task may simply be delegated to someone else. This advantage of the structured interview over the postal questionnaire does not apply when the former is administered by telephone, since the same problem applies. There is a feeling among some commentators that when a self-completion questionnaire is administered over the Internet (a form of administration of questionnaires that is covered in Chapter 28), the problem of not knowing who is replying is exacerbated because of the propensity of some Web users to assume online identities (Couper 2004).

Cannot collect additional data

With an interview, interviewers might be asked to collect snippets of information about the home, school, firm, or whatever. This is not going to be possible in connection with a postal questionnaire, but if self-completion questionnaires are handed out in a school or firm, it is more feasible to collect such additional data.

Difficult to ask a lot of questions

As signalled above, because of the possibility of 'respondent fatigue', long questionnaires are rarely feasible. They may even result in a greater tendency for questionnaires not to be answered in the first place, since they can be offputting.

Not appropriate for some kinds of respondent

Respondents whose literacy is limited or whose facility with English is restricted will not be able to answer the questionnaire. The second of these difficulties cannot be entirely overcome when interviews are being employed, but the difficulties are likely to be greater with postal questionnaires.

Greater risk of missing data

Partially answered questionnaires are more likely, because of a lack of prompting or supervision, than in interviews. It is also easier for respondents actively to decide not to answer a question when on their own than when being asked by an interviewer. For example, questions that appear boring or irrelevant to the respondent may be especially likely to be skipped. If questions are not answered, this creates a problem of **missing data** for the variables that are created.

Lower response rates

One of the most damaging limitations is that surveys by postal questionnaire typically result in lower response rates (see Key concept 8.2) than comparable interview-based studies. The significance of a response rate is that, unless it can be proven that those who do not participate do not differ from those who do, there is likely to be the risk of bias. In other words, if, as is likely, there are differences between participants and refusals, it is probable that the findings relating to the sample will be affected. If a response rate is low, it seems likely that the risk of bias in the findings will be greater.

Mangione (1995: 60–1) has provided the following classification of bands of response rate to postal questionnaires:

over 85%	excellent
70–85%	very good
60–69%	acceptable
50–59%	barely acceptable
below 50%	not acceptable

Tips and skills
Response rates

Response rates are important because, the lower a response rate, the more questions are likely to be raised about the representativeness of the achieved sample. In a sense, this is likely to be an issue only with randomly selected samples. With samples that are not selected on the basis of a probability sampling method, it could be argued that the response rate is less of an issue because the sample would not be representative of a population even if everyone participated! Postal questionnaire surveys in particular are often associated with low response rates, and, as Mangione's classification illustrates, according to some authorities a response rate of below 50 per cent is not acceptable. On the other hand, many published articles report the results of studies that are well below this level. In an examination of published studies in the field of organizational research in the years 1979–83, Mitchell (1985) found a range of response rates of 30–94 per cent. Therefore, if you achieve a low response rate, do not despair. Although writers like Mangione (1995) may regard response rates of 30 per cent as unacceptable (and he may be right about this judgement), a great deal of published research also achieves low response rates. The key point is to recognize and acknowledge the implications of the possible limitations of a low response rate. On the other hand, if your research is based on a convenience sample, ironically it could be argued that a low response rate is less significant. Many students find postal and other forms of self-completion questionnaire attractive because of their low cost and quick administration. The point of this discussion is that you should not be put off using such techniques because of the prospect of a low response rate.

Steps to improve response rates to postal questionnaires

Because of the tendency for postal questionnaire surveys to generate lower response rates than comparable structured interview surveys (and the implications this has for the validity of findings), a great deal of thought and research has gone into ways of improving survey response. The following steps are frequently suggested.

- Write a good covering letter explaining the reasons for the research, why it is important, and why the recipient has been selected; mention sponsorship if any, and provide guarantees of confidentiality. The advice provided in Tips and skills 'Topics and issues to include in an introductory statement' (see Chapter 9) in connection with the kind of letter that might go out in advance of a respondent being asked to be interviewed can be followed to good effect.
- Postal questionnaires should always be accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope or, at the very least, return postage.
- Follow up individuals who do not reply at first, possibly with two or three further mailings. The importance of reminders cannot be overstated—they do work. My preferred approach has been to send out a reminder letter to non-respondents two weeks after the initial mailing, reasserting the nature and aims of the survey and suggesting that the person should contact a member of the research team or me to obtain a replacement copy of the questionnaire if the original one has been lost. Then, two weeks after that, all further non-respondents should be sent another letter along with a further copy of the questionnaire. These reminders have a demonstrable effect on the response rate. Some writers argue for further mailings of reminder letters to non-respondents. If a response rate is worryingly low, such further mailings would certainly be desirable.
- Unsurprisingly, shorter questionnaires tend to achieve better response rates than longer ones. However, this is not a clear-cut principle, because it is difficult to specify when a questionnaire becomes 'too long'. Also, the evidence suggests that the effect of the length of questionnaires on response rates cannot be separated very easily from the salience of the topic(s) of the research for respondents and from the nature of the sample. Respondents may be highly tolerant of questionnaires that contain many questions on topics that interest them.
- Clear instructions and an attractive layout improve postal questionnaire response rates. Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009), as part of what they call the Tailored Design Method (TDM), recommend darker and/or larger print for questions and lighter and/or smaller print for closed answers. However, as well as attending to the aesthetics of the questionnaire, it is also crucial to ensure that there is consistency in the use of font types and embellishments. For example, if you use a larger print for questions, make sure you do that for all questions and that you do not use larger print for other elements of the questionnaire.
- Do not allow the questionnaire to appear unnecessarily bulky. Dillman et al. (2009) recommend printing the questionnaire in a booklet format or using the photocopier to reduce the size of the questionnaire to fit the booklet format. This format also gives the impression of a more professional approach.
- As with structured interviewing (see Chapter 9), begin with questions that are more likely to be of interest to the respondent. This advice is linked to the issue of salience (see above) but has particular significance in the context of research that may have limited salience for the respondent.
- There is some controversy about how significant for response rates it is to personalize covering letters, by including the respondent's name and address (Baumgartner and Heberlein 1984). However, one of the features of the TDM approach advocated by Dillman et al. (2009) is that these details are supplied on covering letters and each is individually signed.
- I am inclined to the view that, in general, postal questionnaires should comprise as few open questions as possible, since people are often deterred by the prospect of having to write a lot. In fact, many writers on the subject recommend that open questions are used as little as possible in self-completion questionnaires.
- Providing monetary incentives increases the response rate. These are more effective if the money comes with the questionnaire rather than if it is promised once the questionnaire has been returned. Apparently, respondents typically do not cynically take the money and discard the questionnaire! The evidence also suggests that quite small amounts of money have a positive impact on the response rate, but that larger amounts do not necessarily improve the response rate any further.

Designing the self-completion questionnaire

Do not cramp the presentation

Because of the well-known problem of low response rates to the postal questionnaire in particular, it is sometimes considered preferable to make the instrument appear as short as possible in order for it to be less likely to deter prospective respondents from answering. However, this is almost always a mistake. As Dillman et al. (2009) observe, an attractive layout is likely to enhance response rates, whereas the kinds of tactics that are sometimes employed to make a questionnaire appear shorter than it really is—such as reducing margins and the space between questions—make it look cramped and thereby unattractive. Also, if questions are too close together, there is a risk of a tendency for them to be inadvertently omitted.

This is not to say that you should be ridiculously liberal in your use of space, as this does not necessarily provide for an attractive format either and may run the risk of making the questionnaire look bulky. As with so many other issues in social research, a steady course needs to be steered between possible extremes.

Clear presentation

Far more important than making a self-completion questionnaire appear shorter than is the case is to make sure that it has a layout that is easy on the eye, as Dillman et al. (2009) emphasize, and that it facilitates the answering of all questions that are relevant to the respondent. The recommendation of darker and/or larger print for questions and lighter and/or smaller print for closed answers by Dillman et al. is an example of one consideration, but at the very least a variety of print styles (for example, different fonts, print sizes, bold, italics, and capitals) can enhance the appearance *but must be used in a consistent manner*. This last point means that you should ensure that you use one style for general instructions, one for headings, perhaps one for specific instructions (like 'Go to question 7'), one for questions, and one for closed answers. Mixing print styles, so that one style is sometimes used for both general instructions and questions, can be very confusing for respondents.

Vertical or horizontal closed answers?

Bearing in mind that most questions in a self-completion questionnaire are likely to be of the closed kind, one consideration is whether to arrange the fixed answers vertically or horizontally. Very often, the nature of the answers will dictate a vertical arrangement because of their sheer length. Many writers prefer a vertical format whenever possible, because, in some cases where either arrangement is feasible, confusion can arise when a horizontal one is employed (Sudman and Bradburn 1982). Consider the following:

What do you think of the Prime Minister's performance in his job since he took office?
(*Please tick the appropriate response*)

Very good ____ Good ____ Fair ____ Poor _____ Very poor ____

There is a risk that, if the questionnaire is being answered in haste, the required tick will be placed in the wrong space—for example, indicating Good when Fair was the intended response. Also, a vertical format more clearly distinguishes questions from answers. To some extent, these potential problems can be obviated through the judicious use of spacing and print variation, but they represent significant considerations. A further reason why vertical alignments can be superior is that they are probably easier to **code**, especially when pre-codes appear on the questionnaire. Very often, self-completion questionnaires are arranged so that to the right of each question are two columns: one for the column in which data relating to the question will appear in a data matrix; the other for all the pre-codes. The latter allows the appropriate code to be assigned to a respondent's answer by circling it for later entry into the computer. Thus, the choice would be between the formats presented in Tips and skills 'Closed question with a horizontal format' and Tips and skills 'Closed question with a vertical format'. In the second case, not only is there less ambiguity about where a tick is to be placed; the task of coding is easier. However, when there is to be a battery of questions with identical answer formats, as in a Likert scale, a vertical format will take up too much space. One way of dealing with this kind of questioning is to use abbreviations with an accompanying explanation. An example can be found in Tips and skills 'Formating a Likert scale'. The four items are taken from an eighteen-item Likert scale designed to measure job satisfaction (Brayfield and Rothe 1951).

Tips and skills
Closed question with a horizontal format

What do you think of the Prime Minister's performance in his job since he took office?
(*Please tick the appropriate response*)

Very good ____ Good ____ Fair ____ Poor ____ Very poor ____ 5 4 3 2 1

Tips and skills
Closed question with a vertical format

What do you think of the Prime Minister's performance in his job since he took office?
(*Please tick the appropriate response*)

Very good	____	5
Good	____	4
Fair	____	3
Poor	____	2
Very poor	____	1

Tips and skills
Formatting a Likert scale

In the next set of questions, you are presented with a statement. You are being asked to indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement by indicating whether you: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), are Undecided (U), Disagree (D), or Strongly Disagree (SD).
(*Please indicate your level of agreement by circling the appropriate response*)

23. My job is like a hobby to me.

SA A U D SD

24. My job is usually interesting enough to keep me from getting bored.

SA A U D SD

25. It seems that my friends are more interested in their jobs.

SA A U D SD

26. I enjoy my work more than my leisure time.

SA A U D SD

Identifying response sets in a Likert scale

One of the advantages of using closed questions is that they can be pre-coded, thus turning the processing of data for computer analysis into a fairly simple task (see Chapter 11 for more on this). However, some thought has to go into the scoring of the items of the kind presented in Tips and skills 'Formatting a Likert scale'. We might, for example, score question 23 as follows:

Strongly agree = 5

Agree = 4

Undecided = 3

Disagree = 2

Strongly disagree = 1

Accordingly, a high score for the item (5 or 4) indicates satisfaction with the job and a low score (1 or 2) indicates low job satisfaction. The same applies to question 24. However, when we come to question 25, the picture is different. Here, agreement indicates a *lack* of job satisfaction. It is disagreement that is indicative of job satisfaction. We would have to reverse the coding of this item, so that:

Strongly agree = 1

Agree = 2

Undecided = 3

Disagree = 4

Strongly disagree = 5

The point of including such items is to identify people who exhibit response sets, like acquiescence (see Chapter 9). If someone were to agree with all eighteen items, when some of them indicated *lack* of job satisfaction, it is likely that the respondent is affected by a response set, and the answers are unlikely to provide a valid assessment of job satisfaction for that person.

Clear instructions about how to respond

Always be clear about how you want respondents to indicate their replies when answering closed questions. Are they supposed to place a tick by or circle or underline the appropriate answer, or are they supposed to delete inappropriate answers? Also, in many cases it is feasible for the respondent to choose more than one answer—is this acceptable to you? If it is not, you should indicate this in your instructions, for example:

(*Please choose the one answer that best represents your views by placing a tick in the appropriate box.*)

If you do not make this clear and if some respondents choose more than one answer, you will have to treat their replies as if they had not answered. This possibility increases the risk of missing data from some respondents. If it is acceptable to you for more than one category to be chosen, you need to make this clear, for example:

(*Please choose all answers that represent your views by placing a tick in the appropriate boxes.*)

It is a common error for such instructions to be omitted and for respondents either to be unsure about how to reply or to make inappropriate selections.

Keep question and answers together

This is a simple and obvious, though often transgressed, requirement—namely, that you should never split a question so that it appears on two separate pages. A common error is to have some space left at the bottom of a page into which the question can be slotted but for the closed answers to appear on the next page. Doing so carries the risk of the respondent forgetting to answer the question or providing an answer in the wrong group of closed answers (a problem that is especially likely when a series of questions with a common answer format is being used, as with a Likert scale).

Diaries as a form of self-completion questionnaire

When the researcher is specifically interested in precise estimates of different kinds of behaviour, the diary warrants serious consideration, though it is still a relatively underused method. The term 'diary' has somewhat different meanings in social research (see Key concept 10.1). It is the first of the three meanings—what H. Elliott (1997) calls the 'researcher-driven diary'—that is the focus of attention here, especially in the context of its use in relation to quantitative research. When employed in this way, the researcher-driven diary functions in a similar way to the self-completion questionnaire. Equally, it could be said that the researcher-driven diary is an alternative method of data collection to observation. It can be thought of as the equivalent of structured observation (see Chapter 12) in the context of research questions that are framed in terms of quantitative research. With diary methods, observation takes place because the person who completes the diary observes his or her own behaviour.

Corti (1993) distinguishes between 'structured diaries' and 'free-text diaries'. Either may be employed by quantitative researchers. The research on gender and time use in Research in focus 10.1 is an illustration of the structured diary. The specific kind of diary employed in this research is often referred to as a 'time-use diary', in that it is designed so that diarists can record more or less contemporaneously the amount of time engaged in certain activities, such as food preparation, childcare, selfcare, eating, and so on. Estimates of the amount of time spent in different activities are often regarded as more accurate than questionnaire estimates, because the events are less subject to memory problems or to the tendency to round up or down (Fisher and Layte 2004). However, a time use diary is more intrusive than answering a questionnaire, and it could be argued that it causes changes in behaviour. Sullivan also asked couples to record in the diary the amount of enjoyment they derived from the different activities. This information was also recorded simultaneously and was answered on a five-point **scale**, like a Likert scale.

Key concept 10.1
The diary in social research

There are three major ways in which the term 'diary' has been employed in the context of social research.

1. *The diary as a method of data collection*. Here the researcher devises a structure for the diary and then asks a sample of diarists to complete the instruments so that they record what they do more or less contemporaneously with their activities. H. Elliott (1997) refers to this kind of use of the diary as 'researcher-driven diary'. Such diaries can be employed for the collection of data within the context of both quantitative and qualitative research. Sometimes, the collection of data in this manner is supplemented by a personal interview in which the diarist is asked questions about such things as what he or she meant by certain remarks. This 'diary-interview', as it is often referred to (Zimmerman and Wieder 1977), is usually employed when diarists record their behaviour in prose form rather than simply indicating the amount of time spent on different kinds of activity.
2. *The diary as a document*. The diary in this context is written spontaneously by the diarist and not at the behest of a researcher but may be used as a source for analysis. Diaries in this sense are often used by historians but have some potential for social researchers working on issues that are of social scientific significance. As Scott (1990) observes, the diary in this sense often shades into autobiography. Blogs (Web logs), which represent what might be thought of as an online diary, may also be used as material on which an analysis might be conducted. Diaries as documents will be further addressed in Chapter 23.
3. *The diary as a log of the researcher's activities*. Researchers sometimes keep a record of what they do at different stages as an *aide-mémoire*. For example, the famous social anthropologist Malinowski (1967) kept an infamous log of his activities ('infamous' because it revealed his distaste for the people he studied and his inappropriate involvement with females). It has been suggested that blogs may be used in this way by researchers (Wakeford and Cohen 2008).This kind of diary often shades into the writing of field notes by ethnographers, about which more is written in Chapter 19.

Research in focus 10.1
A diary study to examine gender and time use

Sullivan (1997) reports the findings of a study of the ways in which the experience of domestic time is gendered. She uses data derived from time-use diaries that were collected in the course of conducting research at the household level for the Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (SCELI) studies referred to in Research in focus 7.1. Data were collected from household members over a one-week period, producing diary information for approximately 1,300 individuals. Diarists indicated what they were doing for every fifteen minutes of the day. Because diaries were completed for several members of a household, it was possible to compare the diaries of others in the household to see if they engaged in certain activities simultaneously. The analysis in this article is based on only those couples for whom there were diary data on at least 6.7 days of valid information. This yields data on 408 couples.

Sullivan (1997: 225) writes:

> The diary booklet requested diarists to record both what they were doing at each point in time, and whether they were doing anything else at the same time, and the subsequent activity coding allows for up to four simultaneous activities in any one quarter hour. . . . Forty-one major groups of activities are recorded in the SCELI diaries, but for the purposes of this analysis the domestic tasks have been grouped into seven categories . . .

The seven categories were (in rank order of the frequency of overall time spent by women performing the task): cooking; cleaning/clothes care; childcare; shopping; gardening; odd jobs/DIY; and domestic travel. Through an analysis of such data, Sullivan is able to show such things as the differences between men and women and the proportion of time doing tasks together.

Crook and Light (2002) employed time-use diaries within a free-text format. University students were asked to keep a diary for a week of the different kinds of study and learning activity in which they engaged at different times of the day. The diaries were divided into fifteen-minute intervals, so that all students had to indicate for each interval 'details of their activity, location, and any study resources that might be in use' (Crook and Light 2002: 162). The various activities were grouped into three types: classes, private study, and social study (that is, study with a peer). They were able to show the very different patterns and amounts of study typically undertaken during a day.

Using free-text recording of behaviour carries the same kinds of problem as those associated with coding answers to structured-interview open questions—namely, the time-consuming nature of the exercise and the risk of introducing error associated with the coding of answers (see Chapter 11 for a discussion of these issues). However, the free-text approach is less likely to be problematic when diarists can be instructed about what is required and when the kinds of behaviour of interest are rather focused. It would be much more difficult to code free-text entries relating to general types of behaviour of the kind studied by Sullivan (1997; see Research in focus 10.1). Structured diaries particularly lend themselves to examining cross-cultural differences in time use—see Research in focus 10.2 for an example.

Corti (1993) recommends that the person preparing the diary should

- provide explicit instructions for diarists;
- be clear about the time periods within which behaviour is to be recorded—that is, day, twenty-four hours, week;
- provide a model of a completed section of a diary;
- provide checklists of 'items, events or behaviour' that can jog people's memory—but the list should not become too daunting in length or complexity;
- include fixed blocks of time or columns showing when the designated activities start and finish (for diaries of the kind used by Sullivan (1996), which show how people budget their time).

Research in focus 10.2
Harmonized European Time Use Surveys project

Time-use diaries offer great opportunities for cross-cultural studies. The Harmonized European Time Use Surveys (HETUS) project coordinates time-use diary studies among a wide range of European nations (see Fisher and Layte 2004). The data-collection process entails two diaries—one for a weekday and one for use on a weekend. The fieldwork covers a twelve-month period, so that the varied activities that take place over the period are covered. Diarists complete the instruments themselves and write in their own words what they were doing during each ten-minute interval during the day. These are later coded into clusters of activities. Diarists also supply information about whether anyone else was present and the location of the activity. For more information, see:
http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-RA-08-014/EN/KS-RA-08-014-EN.PDF
(accessed 16 December 2010).

The diary is mainly completed on paper, but increasingly diaries of this kind can be completed on computer by clicking with a mouse. See Plate 10.1 for part of a sample one-day diary from the HETUS project.

Plate 10.1

Sample diary entry for the Harmonized European Time Use Surveys project

Adult example page 2/3

Time	**What were you doing?** *Record your main activity for each 10-minute period from 10.00 am to 13.00!* Only one main activity on each line! Distinguish between travel and the activity that is the reason for travelling.	**What else were you doing?** *Record the most important parallel activity.* *Indicate if you used, in the main or parallel activity, a computer or internet. You do not need to record the use of a computer or internet during working time.*	**Where were you?** *Record the location or the mode of transport* e.g. at home, at friends' home, at school, at workplace, in restaurant, in shop, on foot, on bicycle, in car, on motorbike, on bus, ...	**Were you alone or together with somebody you know?** *Mark "yes" by crossing*					
					With other household members				
				Alone	Partner	Parent	Household member up to 9 years	Other household member	Other persons that you know
10.00-10.10	*Work*	*Coffe break*	*Workplace*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☒
10.10-10.20				☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10.20-10.30				☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10.30-10.40				☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10.40-10.50				☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10.50-**11.00**				☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11.00-11.10				☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11.10-11.20				☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11.20-11.30				☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11.30-11.40	*Lunch break: had lunch*	*Talked with colleagues*	*Canteen*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☒
11.40-11.50	--"--	--"--	--"--	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☒
11.50-**12.00**	--"--	--"--	--"--	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☒
12.00-12.10	*Lunch break: went to the supermarket*		*On foot*	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12.10-12.20	*Lunch break: bought food*		*Supermarket*	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12.20-12.30	*Lunch break: went back to work*		*On foot*	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12.30-12.40	*Work*		*Workplace*	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12.40-12.50				☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12.50-**13.00**				☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Time diary page as used in the Harmonised European Time Use Surveys. Taken from:
http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-RA-08-014/EN/KS-RA-08-014-EN.PDF (page 110)

Source: Eurostat. Reprinted with permission.

Advantages and disadvantages of the diary as a method of data collection

The studies that have been used to illustrate the use of diaries also suggest its potential advantages.

- When fairly precise estimates of the frequency and/or amount of time spent in different forms of behaviour are required, the diary almost certainly provides more valid and reliable data than questionnaires.
- When information about the sequencing of different types of behaviour is required, the diary is likely to perform better than questionnaires or interviews.
- The first two advantages could be used to suggest that structured observation would be just as feasible, but structured observation is probably less appropriate for producing data on behaviour that is personally sensitive, such as sexual behaviour. Moreover, although data on such behaviour can be collected by structured interview, it is likely that respondents will be less willing to divulge details of the kind revealed in Coxon's (1994) diary research which dealt with sexual behaviour. If such information were collected by questionnaire, there is greater risk of recall and rounding problems (see the first point in this list).

On the other hand, diaries may suffer from the following problems.

- They tend to be more expensive than personal interviews (because of the costs associated with recruiting diarists and of checking that diaries are being properly completed).
- Diaries can suffer from a process of attrition, as people decide they have had enough of the task of completing a diary.
- This last point raises the possibility that diarists become less diligent over time about their record keeping.
- There is sometimes failure to record details sufficiently quickly, so that memory recall problems set in.

However, diary researchers such as Coxon and Sullivan argue that the resulting data are more accurate than the equivalent data based on interviews or questionnaires.

Key points

- Many of the recommendations relating to the self-completion questionnaire apply equally or almost equally to the structured interview, as has been mentioned on several occasions.
- Closed questions tend to be used in survey research rather than open ones. Coding is a particular problem when dealing with answers to open questions.
- Structured interviews and self-completion questionnaires both have their respective advantages and disadvantages, but a particular problem with questionnaires sent by post is that they frequently produce a low response rate. However, steps can be taken to boost response rates for postal questionnaires.
- Presentation of closed questions and the general layout constitute important considerations for the self-completion questionnaire.
- The researcher-driven diary is a possible alternative to using questionnaires and interviews when the research questions are very specifically concerned with aspects of people's behaviour.

Questions for review

Self-completion questionnaire or postal questionnaire?

- Are the self-completion questionnaire and the postal questionnaire the same thing?

Evaluating the self-completion questionnaire in relation to the structured interview

- 'The low response rates frequently achieved in research with postal questionnaires mean that the structured interview is invariably a more suitable choice.' Discuss.
- What steps can be taken to boost postal questionnaire response rates?

Designing the self-completion questionnaire

- Why are self-completion questionnaires usually made up mainly of closed questions?
- Why might a vertical format for presenting closed questions be preferable to a horizontal format?

Diaries as a form of self-completion questionnaire

- What are the main kinds of diary used in the collection of social science data?
- Are there any circumstances when the diary approach might be preferable to the use of a self-completion questionnaire?

Online Resource Centre

www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of self-completion questionnaires. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.