



March 31, 2018

Developing Effective Survey

Questions

The March Outcomes Workgroup met at EMPATH's downtown office and focused on techniques and research behind developing effective surveys and survey questions.

With the help of Dr. Brenner, we learned best practices associated with writing good survey questions, as well as pitfalls to avoid and ways to know if our questions really are measuring what we are curious about.



PHILIP BRENNER, PHD

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Writing Effective Survey Questions

Creating a survey and writing survey questions is a tricky task. Depending on how you ask or frame the question, the respondent may understand the question differently than the researcher intends. According to Dr. Philip Brenner, the basic standard of writing effective survey questions is ensuring that all respondents have the same understanding of each question and that this understanding matches the question's intent. Without this alignment, the survey is susceptible to measurement error and general unreliability.

In describing what could go wrong with writing survey questions, Brenner identified common problems. These include complex syntax (packing multiple questions into one), working memory overload, vague or ambiguous noun phrase, or the use of unfamiliar technical terms. Questions can also rely on a vague or imprecise predicate /relative term, make a misleading/ incorrect presumption, or follow an unclear question category.

To avoid these pitfalls, Brenner suggests that you always pretest your questions to identify any potential biases or presumptions, in addition to simplifying syntax and correcting areas of confusion for respondents. Further, Brenner recommends that people avoid agree/disagree questions in favor of frequency scales to better assess the beliefs of respondents. Most critically, and prior to administering a survey, Brenner says you must make it clear to your respondents WHY you are asking questions and what the purpose of your survey is.

After reviewing common problems, Brenner introduced us all to some best practices for writing good questions by four question types: 1) questions about behavior; 2) questions about (possibly) sensitive behavior; 3) questions about attitudes; and 4) questions in self-administered forms. Due to a time constraint, Brenner focused primarily on questions about behavior.

For questions about behavior, response categories should be exclusive and exhaustive, meaning that respondents should be presented with as many options that pertain to them. An example of this is allowing respondents to "select all that apply" for a question describing race categories. Additionally, these kinds of questions should be specific, and apply inclusive and accessible language that all respondents will understand. It is also helpful to add memory cues to improve recall, i.e. if you are talking about an election, remind respondents who was in that election.

A PDF of Brenner's full presentation is linked on the next page of this report.

During this presentation, Brenner informed us all on the Graduate Certificate in Survey Research at UMass Boston. For those interested, earning a certificate in Survey Research entails the completion of four required courses and three elective credits. Finally, Brenner is a part of a research effort called "Beacon: Be Heard Boston!" which is an ongoing study of a representative sample of roughly 3,000 Bostonians. Data from this survey can be obtained by purchase. Reach out to Dr. Brenner with any inquiries.

THIS SESSION

Developing Effective Surveys
Questions

Philip Brenner, PhD —

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**Happy Spring from
Outcomes Work Group!**

EMPath
One Washington Mall,
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More information on
UMass Boston's
Graduate Certificate in
Survey Research [here](#).

Social Innovations
Journal about "Beacon:
Be Heard Boston!" can
be found [here](#).

Some of Brenner’s Best Practices for Writing Good Questions

Questions about behaviors:

- Response categories should be exclusive and exhaustive
- Questions should be specific
- Use words/terminology that virtually all respondents will understand

Questions about sensitive behaviors:

- Use open rather than closed questions for behavioral frequencies
- Use long questions
- Use familiar words in describing sensitive behaviors

Questions about attitudes:

- Specify the attitude object clearly
- Avoid double-barreled questions
- Measure the strength of the attitude

Questions in self-administered forms (e.g. mail, web):

- Use visual elements consistently to define the desired path through the questionnaire
- If the questionnaire must change conventions, prominent visual guides should alert respondents to the switch
- Place directions where they are to be used and where they can be seen



Check out the slides from Dr. Brenner’s Workgroup session here!

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1caZgHFB_NvZ-s-yEymYDtDdOfFrGn3ODH/view?usp=sharing

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to attend this session of Outcomes Workgroup! We hope that the presentation and questions asked prompted some reflection that you can take with you back to your respective organizations. We look forward to our next meeting!

SAVE THE DATE

Our Next Outcomes Workgroup Meeting is scheduled for:

Thursday, June 14th from 9:30–11:30 am