

Comm 339, Poli Sci 421K, Psych 231: Questionnaire Design for Surveys and Laboratory Experiment: Social and Cognitive Perspectives (all students welcome)

Since the beginning of quantitative social science, a great deal of research has been done using questionnaires, asking people to provide reports describing their mental states, their personality dispositions, their behavioral tendencies, their attitudes and beliefs, and much more. Thus, asking questions and interpreting answers are core activities for social science inside and outside of academics. It is therefore no surprise that most research methods textbooks in psychology, sociology, political science, and many other disciplines include discussions of how to design questionnaires optimally. But unfortunately, most of that advice is out of date and often incorrect.

This course will educate students about how to word questions to accurately learn what other people believe and want and have done, guarding against measurement artifacts and optimally analyzing data in order to overcome the biasing impact of measurement artifacts. And because the huge literature on questionnaire design does not provide guidance to researchers about how to handle every decision they will face, a second goal of the course is to teach students a new way of thinking about questionnaire design, rooted in psychology. The aim is to get students into the heads of their respondents in a way that few have done before. By gaining insight into how respondents approach their tasks of interpreting questions, searching their memories for information, integrating that information into judgments, and expressing those judgments in words, students will begin to develop skills that will help them to manage design issues for which there are not yet formal rules. In the end, students will be experts at designing questions not only for questionnaires but also for everyday conversation, cross-examining witnesses in legal proceedings, conducting interviews of medical patients by physicians, and more.