

OPENING REMARKS  
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At today's session, excerpts will be presented from five out of eleven chapters of a forthcoming report on Approaches to Developing Questionnaires. This report was prepared by the Subcommittee on Questionnaire Design of the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology, and will be issued by the Office of Management and Budget as part of its Statistical Policy Working Paper Series.

I would like to describe the purpose of that report: Starting in the 1970s, the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology prepared a series of reports which describe and prescribe standards of excellence. Each of these reports addresses a subject as, for example, statistical matching or disclosure avoidance techniques. The reports describe current practices critically and include recommendations about how to improve those practices and achieve greater uniformity among Federal agencies in meeting the improved standards.

From the outset, however, it was agreed that a subcommittee on the subject of questionnaire design would not prepare a report to fit the mold. It would not prescribe standards for questionnaire design. That is not due to a dearth of material on the subject. For at least 3 decades, researchers have been writing books and articles with advice about how to improve questionnaires. Recently, the pace of publication on the subject has been accelerating. Moreover, there has been a surge of interest and reporting in the 70s in the disciplines which provide what theory exists for questionnaire design. At the same time, the "Plain English" movement gained adherents in the 70s, and improved communication via plain English is clearly relevant to questionnaire design. Finally, increased concern by the Federal government about respondent burden has been another incentive for improving the quality of survey questionnaires.

Why, in the face of these developments, did the Subcommittee deliberately avoid an assignment to prepare a normative report which might set minimum standards for questionnaire design? The answer is that consensus does not, may never, and possibly should never be reached about how to design a questionnaire. Without denigrating the many valuable How-To-Do-It books and articles, criteria do not exist for choosing among them. Nor is there any assurance that following any advice or rules will produce "good" questionnaires.

Having disclaimed the objective of setting standards, what assignment did the Subcommittee on Questionnaire Design undertake? How could it contribute to improved questionnaire design? The major justification for preparation of the report is to describe the ways in which writers of questionnaires and their sponsors can tell whether the questionnaires will not meet, are not meeting, or have not met the purposes for which they were designed. The report from which these papers are excerpted describes how to develop, test, or evaluate questionnaires. Put another way--while it won't teach you how to design a questionnaire, it provides the basis for judging how satisfactorily a questionnaire works.

Consistent with that objective, the focus is on the techniques for developing, testing and evaluating questionnaires. At least two of these techniques have been imported from England. The procedure for developing new questionnaires by conducting unstructured individual interviews was initially learned from Jean Atkinson of the Social Surveys Division in England. The probing procedure designed to learn how respondents interpret survey questions is discussed at length in a book published in 1981 by William A. Belson entitled The Design and Understanding of Survey Questions. Belson has employed the procedure extensively.