

Developing Instruments: Interview Schedules and Questionnaires

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1. Begin With Your Conceptualization of the Phenomenon

You might be guided by a:

- a. Typology; e.g., types of organizations. "How do organizational features affect reform?"
- b. Causal model. "Are these variables connected as depicted on the diagram?"
- c. Trajectory, Sequence, or Process. "How are certain outcomes accomplished?"

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2. Deduce a Set of Issues or Sets of Variables From the Conceptualization

For example, issues or sets of variables in the lives of families of children with disabilities include "social support," "productive coping," and "unproductive coping."

To go any further towards the development of measuring instruments, you must perform the next step.

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3. Develop Conceptual Definitions of These Issues or Sets of Variables

For example, what is "support"? What is "social support" in contrast to other forms of support? [Use the method of genus and difference.]

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4. Deduce a Set of More Specific Variables From Each Conceptually Defined Issue or From Each Conceptually Defined Variable in Each Variable Set

For example, when you have decided what, in general, and for this population, social support "is," break the concept down into smaller classes of things. For example, list different kinds of social support; e.g., emotional, advice, hands on assistance, financial (is this "social"?),...

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5. Deduce Operational Definitions of These More Specific Variables

Specifically, what are examples of "emotional support"? (Allowing a person to talk at length about their feelings? Coming over to comfort a person? Saying things such as, "You can handle this" or "We will handle this"? Other?) What are examples of "hands on assistance"?

Operationally define all of the specific variables that you want to measure.

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6. Decide What Sorts of Information You Want to Obtain About Each Operationally Defined Variable

Specifically, think of important dimensions along which the different forms of social support (emotional, hands on assistance, etc.) might vary. For example:

- a. the **benefits** family members believe each form of social support would provide;
- b. how difficult it has been to **obtain** the support;
- c. whether **any** of a kind of social support has been obtained;
- d. how **timely** the support has been;
- e. how **adequate** the support has been;
- f. how they have **used** the form of support;
- g. what **benefits** there have been from using it;
- h. what the **costs** of using it have been;
- i. the **effects of not** having received timely support
- j. etc.

Notice that you could become even more specific. Regarding "g," for example, you might want to find out about benefits to the disabled child, to parents as individuals and as a couple, to siblings, to family routines, regarding stress levels, etc. Now, are you going to ask a question about every one of these? Or are you going to ask an open-ended question about, say, benefits, and then probe for the specifics?

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7. Think of Questions

Questions are supposed to enable respondents to remember, organize, and reveal adequate amounts of information (a brief summary? a longish account?) and kinds of information (e.g., about tangible events? about feelings and evaluations?) regarding each identified dimension for each variable for each variable set or issue. Questions might be of the following sorts.

a. Open-ended, story generating questions. "Tell me about..."
 "How did it happen that...?" "In general how difficult was it to obtain...?"

b. Closed-ended, short answer questions.

(1) "How many persons would you say you can count on for emotional support, some words to lift your spirits, encouragement?" [Note that the answer is a ratio-level measure.]

(2) "Please list all of the kinds of social support that you have received over the years?" (And then a question about the kinds of social support received now.)

[Notice that each item listed is merely a nominal-level measure; no value is attributed to each "kind." However, if you sum the number of kinds of support, you have a ratio-level measure.]

c. Rating scales.

(1) "How difficult would you say it has been for you to obtain information on how to teach your child at home. Would you say: (1) very difficult; (2) fairly difficult; (3) fairly easy, but some difficulty; (4) very easy, almost no difficulty"?

Or

(2) "Please put an 'X' at the spot between the numbers that best shows how difficult it has been for you to obtain information on how to teach your child at home."

1	2	3	4	5	

Difficult

Easy

Notice that the first question has an even number of levels; this forces respondents to make either a positive or a negative evaluation. The second question has an odd number of levels; this makes it possible for respondents to adopt the middle position (to waffle? not commit?). The second question also provides a visual format. This may be helpful for some respondents.

(3) "How many persons would you say you can count on for emotional support, some words to lift your spirits, encouragement? Would you say: (1) none; (2) 1-4; (3) 5-10;

(4) more than 10? [Compare this question with "b" above.]

[Note that the answers are on an ordinal scale. The number of each answer is not a value. It is just a name for a category. But you can count the number of persons who give each numbered (ordinal level) answer.] Compare this question with b.(1).

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8. If This Is An Interview Schedule, Think of Probe or Follow-up Questions (Especially for Open-ended Questions)

On the instrument itself, you might write these probes after each question. For example, "(Probe for effects of social support on expectations for improvement in family life.)"

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9. Think About How You Will Organize the Questions On An Instrument

For example, questions might be arranged: 1) to trace a temporal sequence (e.g., from initial thoughts on school reform to the current state of affairs); 2) in families or clusters (e.g., a set of questions on social support, a set on teaching the child, a set on problem behaviors, etc.; 3) from micro issues (e.g., family interaction) to macro issues (e.g., family-in-community)