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Social Research that works for society

Online Data Collection in Social Surveys: Back to basics

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Increasing use of online data collection in UK social surveys

- ONS' Data Collection Transformation Programme
 - 2021 UK Census
 - New Labour Market Survey
- Other Govt Departments and Public Bodies
 - Community Life Survey (DCMS), Active Lives Survey (Sport England), Survey of Londoners (the Mayor of London), Financial Lives Survey (FCA), and more...
- Academic flagship surveys
 - UK Household Longitudinal Study (ISER)
 - Birth cohort studies (various)
- NatCen Panel and NTS panel (web-CATI)

Overview

■ Focus:

- Survey supplier perspective
- High quality surveys based on random probability samples

■ Content

- Current questionnaire design practice is not fit-for-web
- Back to basics
- Transitioning offline only surveys to include online data collection

Current questionnaire design practice is not fit-for-web

- Dominance of face-to-face interviewing in the UK
 - Large-scale switch to telephone interviewing in the 80s did not gain traction in the UK
 - Tendency to collect more data to justify high cost of face-to-face interviewing
 - Positive influence of face-to-face interviewer has allowed for longer questionnaires and more complex & burdensome questions
- Questionnaire design by committee of stakeholders and data users which can result in lengthy questionnaires and cognitively difficult or burdensome questions

Switch from face-to-face to online

■ Absence of interviewer

- Questionnaires need to be shorter
- Questions need to be clear and easy to answer

■ Online includes smartphones

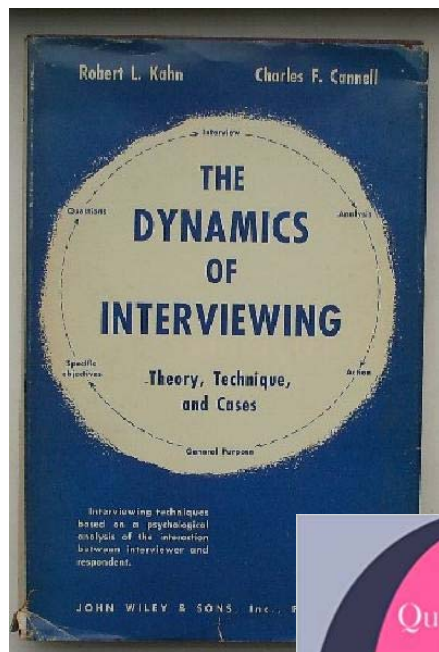
- Questions need to fit on small screens
- The burden of answering questions on a small device needs to be minimised

Some questionnaire design principles

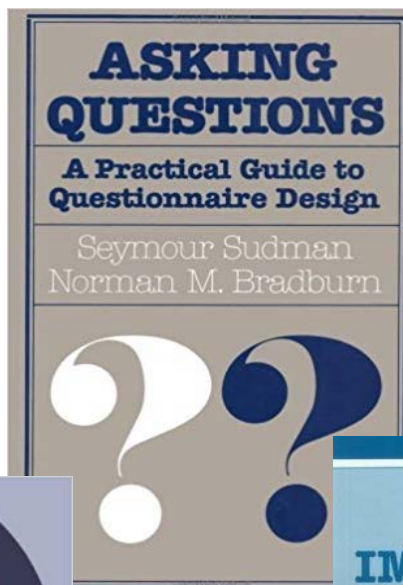
- Reduce questionnaire length
- Minimise text length of preambles, questions, response options, instructions, definitions
- Keep response lists short
- Use simple language and common concepts
- Use simple syntax and avoid complex sentences
- Minimise cognitive burden by keeping tasks manageable
- etc...

Back to basics: good questionnaire design!

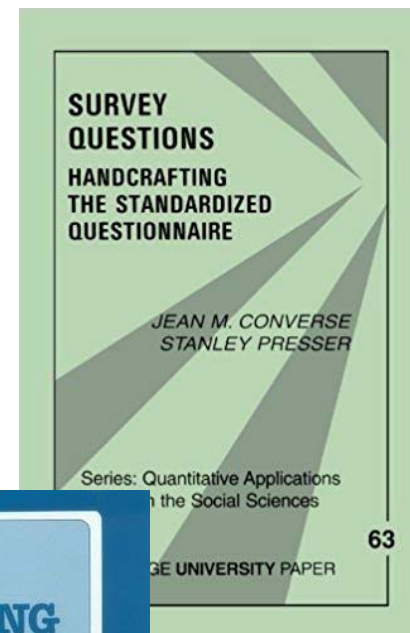
1957



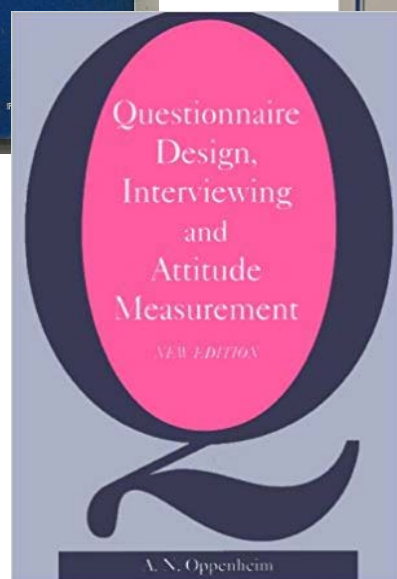
1982



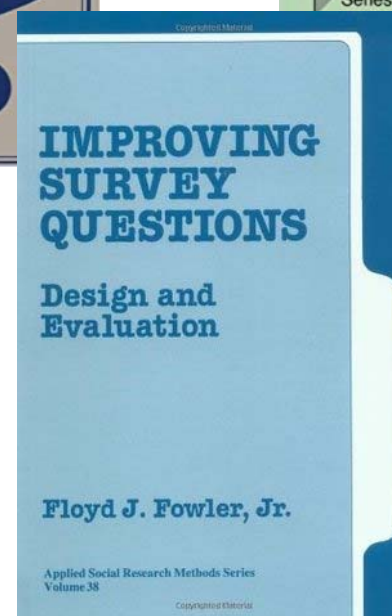
1986

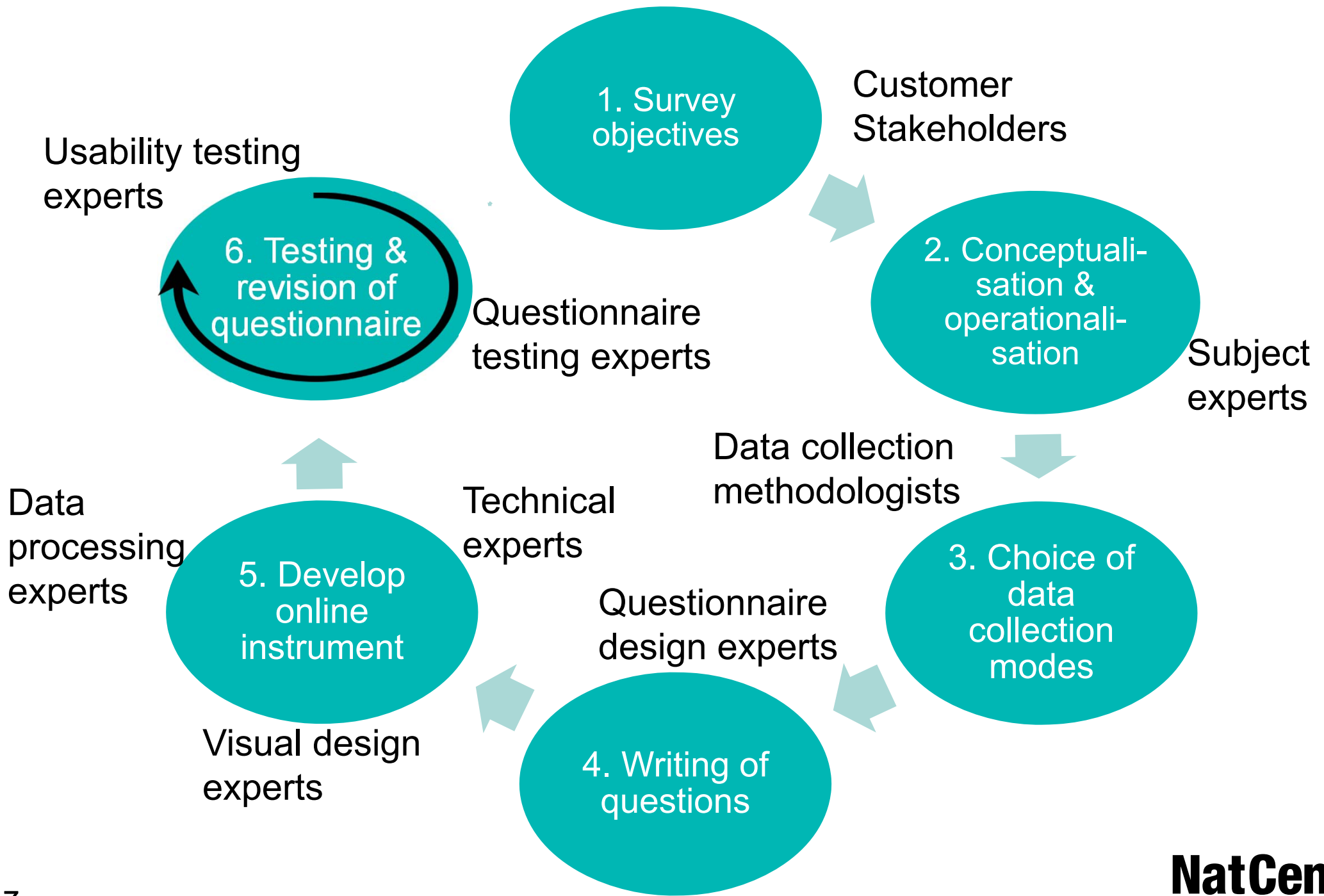


1992



1995





Back to basics:

- A collaborative relationship between the customer and those designing and delivering the survey from the outset
- A multi-disciplinary approach including new technical skills, visual design experts, usability experts
- Good questionnaire design

Transitioning from offline-only to online (stand-alone or mixed mode):

What is best practice?

Three key challenges:

1. Reduce questionnaire length
2. Redesign questions that rely on interviewer-administration
3. Risk to time series

1. Reduce questionnaire length

■ Reduce the overall length of the questionnaire

- Remove non-essential questions?
- Use other data sources?
- Use passive measurement?

■ Split questionnaires (chunking)

- The questionnaire is completed in chunks at different times by the same respondent
- But not all respondents will complete all chunks - missing data

■ Matrix sampling (modularisation)

- Modules of questions are administered to different sub-samples
- Reduced efficiency of estimates based on questions that are not administered to the whole sample (compensate by increasing overall sample size)
- Analysis of questions from different modules can be challenging

2. Redesign questions that rely on interviewer-administration

- Adapt existing question or go back to the concept being measured?
 - For example, ONS development work for new Labour Market Survey
- Unified mode construction or mode optimisation?
 - Unified mode construction uses the same wording and visual layout, even at the expense of utilising a specific mode to its full potential
 - Mode optimisation minimises error within each mode by using each mode to its full potential
- Mobile-optimised or mobile-first?
 - When optimised for mobile, the questionnaire is rendered for small screens but not for larger screens
 - Mobile-first designs use the mobile design across all devices

3. Risk to time series

- Accept the break in time series?
 - e.g. Active Lives Survey
- Parallel run of old and new methodology?
 - e.g. Community Life Survey

Recap:

- Current questionnaire design practices are not fit-for-web
- Back to basics:
 - Basic principles of good questionnaire design
 - A multi-disciplinary approach which includes new skills
 - A collaborative relationship between survey customer and those designing and delivering the survey
- Develop best practice guidelines for transitioning offline-only surveys to include online data collection

What should best practice look like?

Mobile-optimised or mobile-first design?

Uni-mode or optimised for mode?

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