

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus de livres

Sheila B. Robinson and Kimberly Firth Leonard. (2019). *Designing Quality Survey Questions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Paperback, 229 pages. (ISBN 978-1-5063-3054-9)

Reviewed by Sandra Sellick, Evaluation Consultant

Designing Quality Survey Questions is a superb book for anyone who designs, administers, or commissions surveys. Sheila B. Robinson and Kimberly Firth Leonard intend their book to be used by “undergraduate and graduate students grappling with their first, second, or even third research methods course, as well as applied researchers and other practitioners who use surveys as a key data collection tool” (p. xvi). They also correctly anticipate its value to researchers in specific fields, including program evaluation (p. xvi).

In this textbook, Robinson and Leonard take the reader on a deep dive into current research and knowledge about best practice, as well as Likert’s foundational work on scales, to correct common misconceptions about survey design. The book is organized into three sections comprising eight chapters and supported by a glossary, an appendix, and a comprehensive list of references. Structural features also include over 60 figures contrasting weak and strong survey elements and a range of call-out boxes embedded in the text (i.e., Twitter feed, design details, quotes, stories from the field, and mini-interviews). The insights to be drawn from the mini-interviews with consultants E. Jane Davidson and Jara Dean-Coffey are excellent; stories from the field contribute to a sense of community among survey developers, and cartoonist Chris Lysy’s fresh takes on surveys are a delightful complement to the more serious elements of the work. Each chapter ends with thoughtfully crafted questions to check for understanding, a set of design drills for guided practice, and recommendations for further reading.

Among the many strengths of the book is the content of Chapter 6—Special Purpose and Sensitive Questions. This chapter alone is worth the price of the book. Authors present a compelling perspective on collecting demographic information and argue that such questions, if not sensitively developed, will exclude or alienate participants and generate unusable data. The authors emphasize that “for each of these areas there is no single correct way to ask a question” (p. 143), but the guidance they provide will support survey designers in determining the degree of granularity required in their surveys and phrasing such questions to mitigate unintended offence and intimidation. Another strength of the book lies in

Corresponding Author: Sandra Sellick, sandra@evaluationlink.ca

the attention given to viewing the survey from the perspective of respondents. The authors note that “problems with respondent comprehension and interpretation of survey questions are the most intractable problems in survey research and play a large role in our struggle to analyze and use poor-quality survey data” (p. 161).

I predict that this book will be revisited for a second edition in the future, so I propose four recommendations for design enhancements. First, American Evaluation Association sources dominate the cultural competence references. The three references suggested for extended learning are also American publications. More diverse views on cultural competence could provide a broader picture and appeal to a global audience.

The second suggestion concerns criteria for determining whether definitions of key vocabulary are provided in the text, glossary, and/or index. For example, *satisficing* is defined in the text and appears in the index, but it is not in the glossary. *Social proof* is defined in the text but not included in the glossary or index. The important twinned adjectives *exhaustive* and *comprehensive* are defined but not in glossary or the index. On the first page, the authors indicate that the terms *survey* and *questionnaire* are used interchangeably, and they are included in the glossary but not the index. *Poll* is later mentioned and appears to be a synonym, but it is not included in the index or glossary.

Third are some minor aspects that detract from the cohesive nature of the book’s design. One example is the placement of Chapter 1 before Part 1. Retitling this chapter as an introduction or integrating it with the preface might be considered. Another is the degree of unevenness in the distribution of the call-out boxes and figures. With 133 of these insertions in eight chapters, one might expect 16 or 17 per chapter, but the number varied from 30 in Chapter 5 to six in Chapter 8. While these boxes are enriching, each one requires the reader to pick up the thread when moving from a box back to the text. Ideally, there is a good balance in a textbook. Too many can be distracting; too few leave the reader looking for more. In this case, the opening chapters condition the reader to frequent transitions. To sustain this momentum, one or two cartoons, stories from the field, real-world questions, or mini-interviews would add dimension to the last two chapters.

Finally, the checklist of quality question design (pp. 166–171) is a very good tool that would be even more practical in a format with less shading for printer-friendly copy—another suggestion for a future edition, especially if an appendix with a pull-out copy is included, as it is in this edition.

After absorbing the collective wisdom of Robinson and Leonard on survey question design, it is difficult to understand how anyone could prepare a quality survey without the benefit of this useful book. Its value to evaluators will be immense in three domains of evaluator competence: technical practice, situational practice, and reflective practice (Canadian Evaluation Society, 2018). The reflective practice competencies are most clearly articulated in Part III, which emphasizes strategies for assessing and improving the quality of data that will be elicited by survey design features. The book also aligns well with the program evaluation

standards (Yarbrough, Shula, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011) adopted by the CES in 2012, with the closest connections being to the Standards for Propriety (P1, P3, P4, P5) and Accuracy (A2, A3, A5, A6). There is also a strong connection with the Utility Standard—Attention to Stakeholders (U2).

Designing Quality Survey Questions is an outstanding addition to the literature on surveys. It is a book I would place on my required reading list for a social sciences research course. A promising hint about a subsequent book is made in the brief reference to a comprehensive review of analysis as “beyond the scope of this text” (p. 203). Take this as a nod to a companion volume.

REFERENCES

- Canadian Evaluation Society. (2018). *Competencies for Canadian evaluators*. Retrieved from <https://evaluationcanada.ca/competencies-canadian-evaluators>
- Yarbrough, D. B., Shulha, L. M., Hopson, R. K., & Caruthers, F. A. (2011). *The program evaluation standards: A guide for evaluators and evaluation users* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. Retrieved from www.jcsee.org/program-evaluation-standards-statements