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How to research children and online technologies?

Frequently asked questions and best practice

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How to research children and online technologies? Frequently asked questions and best practice. These answers to frequently asked questions of how to research children and their use of online technologies have been written by members of the EU Kids Online network (see Annex 2) and edited by Kjartan Ólafsson, Sonia Livingstone, and Leslie Haddon.

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INTRODUCTION

This list of frequently asked questions and best practice has been compiled by drawing on the multi-disciplinary and multi-method expertise of the many researchers who comprise the EU Kids Online network (see Annex 2). Its purpose is to distil the knowledge, experience, and insights of those actively researching children's use of online technologies for the benefit of those entering or less familiar with this domain. It is intended to be useful to new researchers, to experienced researchers new to this domain, to those commissioning or evaluating research on children and online technologies, and to students and interested others.

The format of 'Frequently Asked Questions' has been chosen as this is how many researchers commonly express their need for knowledge and guidance.

The original list of questions was the result of work carried out by the EU Kids Online network in 2007, and aimed at identifying the range of questions most commonly asked. The network revised it in 2012, but as before, the selected questions have been organized according to the five main sequential steps of the research process, integrating qualitative and quantitative research considerations at each step. These five steps are:

- Designing the research
- Sampling and recruitment of participants
- Data collection
- Analysis of data
- Reporting the findings.

It is important to note that the idea of best practice does not purport to offer definitive or absolute "right" answers, for in this domain as in others, research practice is variable and often contested. Differences in research culture, academic discipline, and practical experience all combine to generate real disagreement about the optimal conduct of research. But this does not mean no guidance can be given. The members of the EU Kids Online network want to put forward this guide in the collaborative spirit of passing on to others their understanding of the literature, best research in and, at times, lessons learned from mistakes.

Each answer to a Frequently Asked Question is structured in a similar way:

- What's the issue?
- Common practice
- Questions to consider
- Pitfalls to avoid
- Examples of studies and researchers' experiences
- References and further resources

The Frequently Asked Questions are also available online at www.eukidsonline.net, together with further resources and research materials (survey questionnaires, interview schedules, etc.) that exemplify useful qualitative and quantitative research practices. Most but not all resources are in English, the aim being to aid researchers across Europe.

EU Kids Online's Methodological Issues Review, freely available from the website, contains up-to-date critical discussion of key methodological issues and a substantial bibliography, and can be a useful supplement and further reading to this guide.

I. RESEARCH DESIGN

FAQ 1: When is it better to do qualitative or quantitative research?

What's the issue?

To some extent all questions may be approached either quantitatively or qualitatively. It all depends on the chief goal. Are you interested in a systematic approach, in order to produce comparable, generalizable data, or do you want to produce a "thick" description of a particular case/group/situation/context? Each option involves different kinds of planning, which may best be followed by a particular research design. Nevertheless, combination or mixed methods approaches prove to be very useful in many situations, and seem to solve many of the problems that arise from adopting a single methodological approach.

Common practice

- Surveys are highly formal and standardized (researchers should be able to anticipate all pertinent questions), while fieldwork/ethnographic methods are informal and open to unexpected data (indicating little control over events).
- Quantitative methods are best for comparing data in a systematic way, making generalizations to the whole population, or testing theories with a hypothesis. This is particularly so when comparing or generalizing information extensively within and from a specific population or between different populations (some of them configured within particular geographical or socio-spatial units, such as countries, regions, etc.).
- A qualitative approach is best for exploring a subject about which you don't know much in advance, or, for the opposite reason, when you want to grasp the meanings, motives, reasons, patterns, etc., usually unnoticed in standardized approaches, such as those you would get with a survey.
- In short, to find quantitative differences in children's behaviour, beliefs, and attitudes, quantitative methods are employed, but to find and illuminate meanings related to these differences, qualitative methods are used.

Questions to consider

What kinds of questions should be translated into what types of research strategy? Are all problems quantifiable? Or should some be presented only qualitatively? Do you want to generalize your findings to the whole population? Are you after deep meanings rather than numbers?

Pitfalls to avoid

- Try to avoid going after quantitative methods just because they provide generalizable results, which many consider as more appropriate and valid.
- Try not to use particular methods just because it seems like a part of your "research tradition".
- Think carefully what the research problem is and go for the method that that particular research question "dictates" should be used.

Example of a quantitative study: EU Kids Online II

In 2010 the EU Kids Online network organized a major, in-home survey of a representative sample of 25,142 children in 25 European countries. The respondents were internet-using children as well as one of their parents. The main aim of the survey was (i) to collect robust and comparable findings regarding the incidence of online risk among European children; (ii) pinpointing which children were particularly at risk and why, by examining vulnerability factors (at both individual and country levels); and (iii) examining the operation and effectiveness of parental regulation and awareness strategies, and

children's own coping responses to risk, including their media literacy. For information on the research design, questions used, and results see: Livingstone *et al.* (2011a, 2011b).

Not all quantitative studies mobilize these kinds of resources; nonetheless, their objectives remain identical: to obtain large amounts of information, under the same standardized conditions, in order that they can be treated, analysed, and interpreted statistically. One of the main advantages of quantitative methods is precisely the possibility of making comparisons and enabling generalizations. This explains the popularity of surveys. But they also present some limitations. The number of questions is always limited, not to mention their scope, and some subjects may be difficult to translate into "closed questions", especially if dealing with sensitive subjects or when searching for meaning and understanding.

Example of a qualitative study: EU NET ADB

The EU NET ADB project used a qualitative approach to study what they labelled as "internet addictive behaviour" to examine behavioural patterns variously described in the literature as, for example, internet addiction, internet abuse, internet dependence, compulsive internet use, excessive internet use, pathological and problematic internet use, and internet use disorder (see Dreier *et al.*, 2012). Given the dynamic nature of internet use the researchers thought that a qualitative approach was appropriate, building on the view that methodologies employed to examine internet use along with its ensuing consequences should keep pace with the continuous transformation of digital landscape and be regularly revised accounting for new forms of internet use and functions. The researchers came to the conclusion that as the phenomenon of internet addictive behaviour was relatively "new", and no formal theory or formal diagnostic criteria had been developed, grounded theory was a good fit for this process-oriented exploratory study.

Examples of combined approaches

Only at an abstract (or purist) epistemological level are quantitative and qualitative approaches likely to be presented as completely incompatible. In most cases, a combination of methods may prove to be more useful. Under different research circumstances both strategies can be (and usually are) combined. In fact, quantitative and qualitative mean different things in different situations. The actual form this combination will take depends, on the one hand, on the objectives and, on the other hand, on research development.

The quantitative SAFT study used data resulting from "free" qualitative methodology (see Bjørnstad & Ellingsen, 2004) to formulate questions and to provide explanations and insights for the interpretation of the quantitative data.

In the project Children and their Changing Media Environment (Livingstone, 2002; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001), a qualitative study preceded a quantitative one, which proved to be very helpful when interpreting the quantitative data (Livingstone & Lemish, 2001); the same happened with the UK Children Go Online research project. As the authors of the study noticed, "Though often insightful in suggesting themes or trends, qualitative research is best complemented by quantitative research in order to judge the scale and significance of the findings" (Livingstone & Bober, 2004).

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FAQ 2: How do I design a project with multiple data sources?

What's the issue?

It can often be valuable to approach a research question from many diverse perspectives. This may involve using different methods and also different data sources. The benefits of using multiple data sources depend on what they add to a particular piece of research. This could be related to diverse research contexts or to different information about the same subject.

Common practice

- The combination of methods may assume several forms, depending on the importance given to a specific method in the overall research and on the development of the research process itself. In what researchers might call a "sequential model", you may begin with the quantitative (e.g. survey) to "map" a subject and then pursue with the qualitative (e.g. interview) to "get deeper" into some topics. Or you may start with the qualitative (e.g. observation, interviews) to explore a given subject and then turn to the quantitative. Alternatively, in what researchers might call a "concurrent model", you may follow both approaches simultaneously, either to explore in different ways the same aspects of your subject or to cross-validate (or "triangulate") information gathered through different methods (Lobe *et al.*, 2007).

- Multiple data sources may also confront researchers with different perspectives concerning the same subject. In some cases the only choice might be to combine sources in order to get all the information you need about your research object. In any case, defining the status of different data sources is mandatory in order to articulate properly all the information available and needed.

- Unlike cases in which researchers deal with different methodologies, different sources of information may be combined within the same methodology, as in the case of using different questionnaires to address the same problem. In this situation be careful to distinguish between the criteria used in the various sources of information (e.g. how a particular variable is measured in different questionnaires). When using different samples (collected throughout different periods of time), or a sample obtained in several populations, you are also combining different sources of information.

Questions to consider

Don't forget that comparing different sources (containing data gathered for different purposes) is not exactly the same as comparing information from a single data frame. In the first case you are considering secondary analysis; in the second case you are actually comparing data within the same (or an equivalent) dataset. This isn't only a problem of considering different sample designs, but also of being sure if (or to what extent) data are comparable, and in what way this comparison may be carried out. Asking the same questions of different individuals also confronts researchers with distinct perspectives in relation to what apparently is the same activity/practice/event. For example, when you ask parents about their children's activities and compare the answers with the children's own accounts, discrepancies are common.

Pitfalls to avoid

Researchers often overlook the fact that existing data can be used. They make use of multiple sources without having a clear goal of why they do so. They underestimate the complexity of such studies (qualitative, quantitative, parents, children).

Example of a study using multiple data sources

Hasebrink *et al.* (2009) used results from various studies conducted in Europe from 2000 to 2008 to identify and explain the pattern of cross-national similarities and differences in children's online use, skills, opportunities, risks, and safety. The

report relied to a considerable extent on the Safer Internet Programme's 2005 and 2008 Eurobarometer surveys of parents, but then used the results of dozens of other studies to supplement and validate results obtained in the two surveys. The evidence collected from the various studies allowed the authors to reveal a range of cross-national differences in relation to children's online use and risk especially, and to classify countries in Europe in terms of online risks and opportunities.

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FAQ 3: When is it good to use focus group, in-depth interviews, and observations?

What's the issue?

You have taken a decision that you will conduct a qualitative data collection, but which method do you choose? Do you want to observe a particular group or site for a long period in order to discover how meanings, representations, and behaviour come about? Or would a group where participants share and compare their experience be better? Perhaps you are dealing with specific and sensitive issues and would rather conduct in-depth interviews?

Common practice

- In-depth interviews and focus groups can be used as part of a mixed methods research strategy (e.g. as a complementary method to a survey). Each one, however, can be used as a research method in its own right, which produces specific findings (qualitative), entails different sampling criteria, and certain basic rules. In fact, researchers have developed a range of techniques and several strategies for working with groups of children and young people.

- These include using visual retrieval aids for recall, asking "why" questions (who/what/when/where/why) rather than yes/no questions, and open-ended rather than closed questions, and explaining that "I don't know" is an acceptable reply (to reduce response biases) (see Lobe *et al.*, 2007).

- As a general rule, in-depth interviews are best when you are interested in individual experience, perceptions, and feelings, regarding several topics of interest that can only be attained through an informal conversation alone with a child informant. Thus, they are particularly suitable when investigating sensitive issues such as risky online experiences. On the other hand, focus groups are best when you want to consider not only children's own accounts of reality, but the way they negotiate these accounts with others, therefore showing divergence or convergence between their views.

- Focus groups can be used to examine children's practices, perceptions, and beliefs in the context of their peer-related activities, thus uncovering meanings and feelings, shared representations, specific topics that children of the same age talk about, and, more specifically, how they communicate about their media and internet interests and experiences. Often, media use and content is selected, assigned significance, and interpreted through social interaction within groups. The dynamics of children's peer groups can be at least partly captured and reproduced within focus groups.

- In a focus group design, social interaction between participants is the core issue. The researcher should encourage and observe discussions between individuals. Being able to collect the information needed while observing interaction amongst participants is an obvious benefit of conducting a focus group.

- Since focus groups are based on social interaction, the context within which that interaction takes place is of the utmost importance. Focus groups can be conducted in informal peer group settings, and in classroom situations, as well as at home. The location of the research matters to children (and, no doubt, to adults), and should be familiar to the child. In this particular sense, focus groups are more similar to "natural groups" (i.e., pre-existing social groups, such as friends, class mates, families, etc.) than to "artificial groups" (usually assembled by marketing researchers), including people who don't necessarily know each other (and are actually not supposed to).

- Researchers have pointed to a number of reasons for using online focus groups, namely, the speed, ease, and low cost of computer-mediated social research. Moreover, as already highlighted in the first age of the internet studies, being anonymous promotes self-disclosure related to sensitive issues, thus reducing difficulties of disclosure with peers in a face-to-face context. However, online focus groups raise ethical considerations: in particular, traditional ethical guidelines need to be revisited, also taking into account codes of conduct relating to online behaviour. A limitation of using online focus groups with younger children is that developing a rapport between interviewer and interviewees is more difficult and takes longer than face-to-face interaction.

- Observation may be a part of other methods (e.g. occurring during focus groups) or be employed as an independent or alternative method. Participant observation of children's playing falls into this last category. It may also be part of an experimental design, based on systematic observation. When researching very young children, this last procedure may prove to be particularly adequate, since children could reject other methods, or they may simply be inappropriate for certain ages.

- When investigating children's online experiences, researchers could also engage in forms of "virtual ethnography" or "virtual shadowing", following the informant or the natural group in their online interactions. This method raises important ethical issues, however: not only must children be informed, but they also need to give their consent. One possibility is to ask children about the digital outputs of their daily media practices, such as daily digital accounts or diaries.

Questions to consider

Any research interaction with children should allow sufficient time for "warming up" and developing a rapport with the children. It is also important to arrange for more than one meeting in order to gain the child's trust, especially in the case of in-depth interviews on sensitive issues. Furthermore, the research process should be varied as a child's concentration span calls for variety in approaches (mixing methods, shifting focus, introducing varied materials).

Media use and content is often selected, assigned significance, and interpreted through social interaction within peer groups. The dynamics of children's peer groups can be at least partly captured and reproduced within focus groups.

Several basic strategies have been noticed by authors who have worked with children in focus groups (Morgan *et al.*, 2002): care in the recruitment and composition of the group (4–5 children is probably best, as is separating boys and girls for older children); achieving a balance of power that enables spontaneous contributions; setting the scene to encourage informality and participation, specifying ground rules, and structured warm-up activities; managing space and time by breaking up the session, varying the activities, and arranging the space; accessing children's meanings through appropriate prompts and probing; use of an alternative personality (e.g. a stuffed toy or cartoon character to take the place of the interviewer); pen-and-paper exercises, especially for drawing or for producing a shared image; role-playing scenarios with dolls, toys, or the children themselves; and observing the group dynamics, tensions, and sensitive moments (Irwin & Johnson, 2005; Lewis, 1992).

Pitfalls to avoid

Regarding the role assigned to children in an interview, it is important to treat them as active participants, rather than as mere respondents, giving them the opportunity to explain their responses in the interviewing process. Children must not get the feeling that they have to give the "right" answers.

Interviews, individual or collective, are the result of a given social process, which means they are not simply "neutral" conversations between two or more individuals. In this sense, all information is the result of a particular social relation between interviewer and interviewee. The context in which the interview takes place, the roles that are assigned to participants, the individual characteristics of participants (both interviewer and interviewee) – all influence the kind of relationship established and the nature of the information gathered.

Although focus groups add to in-depth interviews the possibility of observing group dynamics, they could be restrictive if the intention is to explore certain topics related to single individuals. This is particularly the case when dealing with children or young people.

Be aware of the number of participants in focus groups – having more participants will not make the data more generalizable.

A researcher's experience

Natural groups are one of the most appropriate methods to investigate children and their media uses. One of their main advantages is the opportunity for the researcher to observe social interaction in its natural setting and, as far as children's use of online technologies are concerned, observe how practices of use are defined, negotiated, and shaped within social networks and peer relations. In contrast, focus groups organized through recruitment agencies can introduce a significant bias, since many recruitment agencies now make use of 'professional focus groupers', that is, people (even teenagers and younger children) who are used to joining several focus groups per year, and who also sometimes specialize in talking about certain topics (such as media consumption). However, natural groups may also pose some challenges to the researcher because the group observed is characterized by established relationships, certain roles, and relations of power within the group that the researcher has to identify and bear in mind. Another side effect of the study of pre-existing social networks is the fact that they tend to share a common experience expressed in terms that are largely taken for granted and unfamiliar to the researcher. This aspect, though, may be peculiar to all focus groups on children, since they tend to speak their 'own' language and perceive the researcher (independently of age, in/formal look, etc.) as a stranger, too odd to understand what they are speaking about. This was the case of one research project where the group was comprised of two boys and two girls aged 14 and 15, two of whom had been boy- and girlfriend. The two kept on flirting during the interview, much to the great disappointment of the other girl who was seemingly jealous of her friend. The interview was somewhat hard to manage, especially when the group was asked to tell and show what kind of texts and MMS [Multimedia Messaging Service] they used to exchange, since most of this was related to the previous 'affair' between them. (Giovanna Mascheroni, Italy)

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FAQ 4: How should quantitative research be evaluated?

What's the issue?

Quantitative data as well as qualitative data has to be evaluated on the basis of its ability to reach the objectives of the research. As well as more complicated discussions related to the epistemological value of quantitative approaches, the decision to use quantitative data should therefore be the answer to the question of what kind of data is needed to analyse a particular problem. If the main aim of the study is generalizability, then this is usually best achieved through quantitative methods such as surveys. This doesn't exclude, however, the possibility of combining, in different sorts of ways, quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Common practice

The decision to use quantitative methods is usually based on the desire to achieve a certain level of generalizability. More specifically, the goal is to achieve reliable and accurate measurement for one or both of the following:

- Point estimates: the desire to be able to state, for example, how many children use the internet, and what they do online.
- Relationship between two or more variables: for example, if girls are more likely than boys to go online or vice versa.

As the goal of quantitative studies is to get results that then can be said to apply generally, the main issue in these studies is to limit both random and systematic errors:

- Random errors are controlled by using the appropriate statistical tests, and as a rule of thumb, the bigger the sample the smaller the random error.
- Systematic errors are controlled through the research design and through strict control over the research process. One of the most effective ways of limiting systematic error is to use simple random sampling and to achieve a high response rate.

Questions to consider

The first goal of making point estimates puts quite strong demands on the data, especially in terms of systematic error. This means, for example, that children with certain social status are more likely than others to be interviewed in a study that weakens the data as a basis for estimating how many children use the internet. However, even if systematic error is present in the data, it might still be possible to make quite accurate estimates for the relationship between variables.

The popularity of quantitative methods derives from the possibility of making generalizations. But there are also some limitations. The number of questions is always limited, not to mention their scope, and some subjects may be difficult to translate into "closed questions", especially if dealing with sensitive subjects, or when searching for meaning and understanding.

Pitfalls to avoid

Because quantitative methods rely on comparability and generalization, the ability to measure exactly the same thing each time is crucial. This, of course, poses problems of reliability (measuring something the same way each time, without introducing any changes) and of validity (finding a way of measuring exactly what is intended in a particular piece of research). The last problem is more difficult to solve than the first, since it depends on the ability to translate a particular research problem accurately into a specific set of questions. In other words, the problem of validity is directly connected with how well the concept or construct is translated into a set of indicators to measure what researchers want to know.

Many quantitative studies are based on questionnaires. But questionnaires can be tricky, and the validity of the results depends to a large extent on the assumption that all respondents have understood the questions in the same way and in the same way as the researcher. It is especially important to critically evaluate this assumption when working with children.

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FAQ 5: How should qualitative research be evaluated?

What's the issue?

Qualitative research is usually evaluated differently than quantitative research, especially by ethnographers. As the data collection is often of a nature that is harder to be repeated (such as surveys or experiments, for instance), qualitative researchers came up with different a set of quality measures, such as credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability (see Guba and Lincoln, 1989), members checking, and others.

Common practice

- Researchers usually demonstrate credibility, in the form of properly used scientific methods, triaging, experience, and beliefs.
- Dependability as a criterion of consistency is achieved by auditing the procedure, where the research process and researcher's work has been closely examined and evaluated by other experts in the field.
- Transferability assumes that research methods, analytic categories, and characteristics of phenomena and groups are identified so explicitly that comparisons can be made between interviews or fieldwork, for example.
- Confirmability is usually also checked by auditing. Auditors (other experts in the field) focus on how the interpretations are grounded in the data, and whether they are formulated in ways consistent with the available data.
- The most basic evaluation for qualitative methods is members checking. Researchers simply check the data and interpretations, getting back to the respondents as the source of the original data of the study. This could take place either at the end of research, providing participants with reports to ensure that their views have been properly captured, or during the research process, where participants also help to design questionnaires and interview guidelines. In this instance, they are seen as co-researchers (Kellett, 2005). It can also be used to increase the credibility of the research.

Questions to consider

Which data quality standard is the most sensible to approach the qualitative data with? Are children old enough to go through members checking?

Pitfalls to avoid

A common mistake in qualitative methods is to look for "quantitatively" denoted validity and reliability as the only proof to scientific objectivity. Qualitative methods are often semi-structured or unstructured and even informal, which makes it difficult to determine in advance what researchers want to "measure". It is also literally impossible to replicate an observation, a focus group, or an interview to the extent researchers can replicate surveys, for instance.

Another mistake derives from the assumption that since researchers are dealing with participants' own accounts of social reality or, in some cases, observing and participating in several social situations, that they have access to social "reality itself". This notion is emphasized by the idea that they are looking at "natural settings" within which social interactions take place, and not at "second-hand" accounts. Yet all accounts (and observations) of social reality are mediated by participants, in one way or another and, thus, all research situations are, to some extent, "artificial".

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FAQ 6: How young a child can one work with?

What's the issue?

In any research with children, including that relating to media and the internet, age differences are consistently amongst the most important background factors. Reporting findings by age, charting age trends, or comparing age groups is expected by most readers. It would be the absence of age differences, not their discovery, that would be counterintuitive, if and when it occurred. A useful principle, therefore, is to assume that each child is capable of providing valid and insightful information, provided that s/he is approached appropriately and that the data are interpreted carefully.

The problem is that even younger children are going online and it is difficult to get information straight from them. Children were not used, for example, as survey respondents before the 1990s because their responses were not considered reliable and valid (Bell, 2007).

Lately children have seemed more and more capable of constructing and defining their own social lives. Therefore researchers have to study carefully what kinds of research methods are valid, especially amongst the youngest children.

Common practice

A range of principled or common-sense rules of thumb is evident in published accounts of research. In general, two major turning points can be assumed, with key adjustments in methods being made for respondents older or younger than 7–8, and older or younger than 11–12. It is worth noting that these age transitions tend to mirror the transition points in Piaget's stage mode.

However, researchers have to keep in mind that sociologists in particular have criticized developmental psychology treating children as a mass, disregarding other variables as gender or social class. Childhood is no longer seen as biological, but also as a social state (see Kellett, Robinson, & Burr, 2004; O'Kane, 2000; Scott, 2000).

For children younger than 6, it is common to rely on proxy respondents such as parents or teachers, but it is also possible to use other methods such as drawing, role-play, and observational methods over interviews.

Besides these general rules, consider questions related to the use of each research method with children from particular age groups and its adequacy regarding the problem at hand:

- Interviews: interviews and research in general are cultural practices where childhood is not only described but also constructed (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). Therefore interviewing children needs special discretion. Children are not familiar with research and interviewing processes and need a familiar and fearless interviewing atmosphere. It is also important to tell children what the research is about, how findings will be used, and that a child has the right to refuse to participate to the research or to be part of it.

  Cognitive interviewing has been considered a better way to produce data quality in surveys of 7- to 12-year-old children than standard interviewing. This has been used to study the manner in which children understand, mentally process, and respond to the questions (Ogan *et al.*, 2012).

  Individual and group semi-structured interviews are usually used with children older than 7. For younger children less structured methods are used (Christensen & James, 2000). As for individual interviews with young children, even children as young as 4 and 5 are effective in referential communication (i.e., describing an object to a listener). This is only true on the condition that they have to describe familiar objects in a face-to-face interaction in a familiar, naturalistic setting (Bukatko & Daehler, 2001). Children can give important information when they show what media devices and contents they use and are interested in, how they play digital games, go to use the internet, etc.

  The best places for interviews with younger children are usually their homes where they feel comfortable and are free to move and play. Interviewers may need to participate in the play as a part of the interview. A hand puppet can be a

perfect medium to engage with the child and to adjust to her/his language. Interviews should be arranged in terms of the child's timings and usually need more time because children should have the opportunity to leave the room, come back, play, and do other things during the interview. It is also important to see when a child is too tired for the interview.

- Adolescents interviewing children: adults usually interview children and the interview is thus marked by inequality between an adult interviewer and a child. Children often suppose that adults want to have the "right" answers to their questions and have a habit of answering an adult even when they do not know the answer (Scott, 2000). It may also be difficult to get honest answers in questions dealing with, for example, control. Younger interviewers nearer the age of the respondents may change the interview situation more informally – they may be closer to the respondents' media world and experiences and represent the same kind of social world. A similar way of speaking may bring the interviewer and respondent closer (Pääjärvi & Toukonen, 2012). However, adolescent interviewers as some kind of mediator between children and adults are rarely used due to numerous difficulties, such as training of interviewers, research ethics, etc.

- Participative observation: interviews with younger children are partially participative observation when children show how and what media they use. This method also enables observation of how children interact with each other while using media. Thus, emphasis can be placed on how a single child deals with the media, or on exposure of a social system in which children are growing up (e.g. family, nursery school, school) to the media.

- Children's drawings and photographs: the advantage of children's drawings is the possibility of revealing aspects that cannot be verbalized. They provide an insight into the visual and intellectual capabilities of children, the emotions experienced while they are drawing, as well as their level of development. But children's explanations of their drawings are needed in order to interpret them adequately. Children also like to use media devices such as cameras or mobile phones as a vehicle to record their everyday life experiences.

- Experiments: these are often favoured when dealing with very young children who aren't yet able to verbalize their experiences and mindsets. However, young children, even preschoolers, have the language skills to describe what they remember. Young children remember familiar (repeated) events in terms of scripts. It is remarkable that all children recall older items better (recency effect), whereas a good recall for early items (primacy effect) is more apparent with children aged 7 and older.

Questions to consider

When researching with children, particularly in the case of very young ones, combined approaches and alternative methods should be tried as well as different perspectives on media and internet use. Otherwise, research could be partially compromised at best, or completely beyond reach at worst. Sometimes solutions to problems rely on methodological imagination.

Pitfalls to avoid

A common flaw in research with children is addressing the child as more mature, or more competent, than they are – overestimating their linguistic skills, for example, or underestimating the gap between competence (what they can really do) and performance (what the researcher has been able to observe them doing).

Another flaw is to address a child as not capable of being a social actor in order to define his/her own social life. The starting point for the research is the child and his/her experiences, not the adult's expectations. Adult researchers too often try to reinforce their own opinions and lead a child to a specific direction, for example, in his/her answers. Child-centric research needs a special consideration towards the child's world and experiences.

Researchers should carefully consider if a child is capable of estimating the time he/she uses for media practice or how often he/she uses special media. Even 7-year-olds find it difficult to estimate how much time they spent with the media.

Examples of a project using adolescents as interviewers

The Children's Media Barometer (2011) in Finland was conducted partly using adolescents as interviewers of 7- and 9-year-old students in schools. The interviewers were students from the upper level of elementary school. They were trained

to manage the interviews, with the training lasting 90 minutes. In addition, they received written instructions about the interview techniques and the ethical principles of the research. The interviews usually took place in the school corridor and took about 10–20 minutes; 194 students took part in the project, and 620 interviews were conducted.

The interview method was found to be fluent and efficient. The relationship between the interviewers and respondents was informal, and younger children found it easy to talk with their older students. Ninety-eight per cent of adolescents mentioned that interviewing was a positive experience, and 95% were interested in participating again in some research. The Children's Media Barometer researchers did not encounter any unreliability in the data collected by the peer students.

The problems were mainly the lack of specifying questions and the great amount of leading, although this is usually problematic in traditional interviews as well.

The project also enhanced young people's agency, both within research and the school world.

Example of a project using an experimental method with very young children

The "this-or-that" method, which is used in experiments, is found to be useful with preschoolers between the ages of 4 and 6 to conduct likeability research (Zaman & Abeele, 2007). At the beginning of this experiment, each child was asked to play with two objects, for example, games (the order in which the games are presented are counterbalanced). The researcher tried to interfere as little as possible and undirected play was supported (no tasks, since these conflicted with the explorative nature of the games). After both games were finished, a likeability questionnaire was administered. Likeability was measured with five questions: (1) Which game did you find most fun (most fun); (2) Which game would you want to receive as a gift (wanted gift); (3) Which game would you like to take home with you (take home); (4) Which game would you like to play again (play again); and (5) Which game did you find the most stupid (most stupid)? – this question was reversed in the final likeability measure. These answers were triangulated with free play at the end of the test: as a "reward" for participating the child could choose one of the two games and play the game again. As well as quantitative measurements, qualitative material was also gathered. Interaction styles and comments uttered by the young child when playing the game were video recorded. Only after the complete test was finalized (playing the two games and answering the likeability questionnaire) did the researcher follow up on this qualitative information and ask the child to explain a little more why one game was chosen over another, according to the contextual laddering method (Zaman, 2008).

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FAQ 7: In comparative research, how do I choose which countries to compare?

What's the issue?

Little formal attention is paid to the question of country selection, these decisions often being somewhat ad hoc, convenient, or serendipitous, not necessarily best meeting the research aims but depending instead on practicalities of contacts and funding. Yet, depending on the countries compared, findings will centre more on similarities or on differences.

Hence, a research project which spans continents, comparing vastly different countries, may have difficulty identifying the fine-grain differences which research on similar countries will reveal. Conversely, comparing similar countries, perhaps from the same geographic region, may miss the bigger picture of transnational differences. The lens you choose to apply depends on the research question being asked.

Common practice

If you are treating each nation as the object of study, comparing fairly similar countries may prove most useful, particularly to inform regionally-based (e.g. European Commission) policy.

If you are studying the generality of a finding across nations (the country as the context of the study), selecting countries so as to maximize diversity along the dimension in question should allow you to explore the scope or universality of a phenomenon.

For the third model, you would select countries to capture diversity within a common framework: since the use of multiple dimensions invites a conception of the relations among them, this tends to support theory building through the development of a common framework based on a pan-national conception of the dimensions themselves.

Lastly, projects that conceptualize the nations to be compared as components of a transnational system will select countries by seeking to maximize range and diversity globally.

Questions to consider

While policy development, especially at a European level, provides a significant impetus towards comparison based on standardization, with substantial funding being used to generate multinational quantitative datasets, the academic trend is increasingly "away from universalistic culture-free approaches to culture-boundedness, which has placed the theory and practice of contextualization at the nexus of cross-national comparative studies" (Hantrais, 1999: 93).

This is, arguably, a particular problem for qualitative research. As Mangen (1999: 110) observes, "the strengths of qualitative approaches lie in attempts to reconcile complexity, detail and context" – all dimensions that are particularly difficult to convey when translating across languages and research cultures, and when undertaking the exercises in standardization or data reduction that making comparisons seems to demand. Yet such concerns also apply to quantitative research, where the ease of producing neat tables of statistics may beguile the researcher into neglecting crucial differences in the meaning of terms or the contexts within which they apply.

Pitfalls to avoid

Many comparative researchers address the challenge of comparison by standardizing their methodology and research tools, devoting considerable attention to strict equivalence in measurement procedures through such techniques as the back-translation of survey instruments, as well as ensuring transparency by including questionnaires and coding schedules in the final publications. The difficulties of comparative research, on this view, stem from the challenging task of

ensuring equivalence of terms, comparability of measures, and in applying standardized forms of analysis. It must be acknowledged, however, that many (perhaps all) key concepts change their meaning on translation.

In practice, quantitative research usually makes an effort to keep the exact wording in different national surveys (although variation can still be introduced in the process of translation and in terms of whether a concept means the same thing in different countries/cultures). In qualitative interviews, the difficulties are compounded by the fact that researchers can agree on a general interview schedule, but then in "conversations" with the participants the exact wording often varies, depending on the particular interview context, on a researcher's disciplinary training, and on the cultural or national research context.

An example of a cross-national project: Mediappro

The Mediappro project illustrates the first approach, as it sought to identify the specific cultural contexts within which children in different countries use the internet and, in consequence, use it differently. While findings from one country were used to stimulate questions for another, with findings from each country reported side by side, few direct comparisons were drawn, possibly because these seemed to violate the cultural integrity of each nation.

About 9,000 young people aged 12–18 (7,400 in Europe and 1,350 in Québec) participated in the Mediappro project. For practical reasons, each national team selected the participants from their schools with the consent of school principals and parents. In order to construct a relevant sample at the international level, schools were selected according to their geographical location and their social, economic, and cultural setting. Three school grades, representing three age groups, were defined: 12–14 (beginning of secondary school), 15–16 (middle of secondary school), and 17–18 (end of secondary school). Using this method researchers were able to obtain a varied sample representing the diversity of young people's life contexts, reflecting national differences that exist across Europe. Data were collected through two means. The project team designed a common questionnaire including 63 items and distributed it to the whole sample during school time, from September to October 2005. Based on the results of this quantitative phase, 240 young people (24 in each country) were selected according to their different levels of internet usage, age, and gender, for individual interviews. […] Aside from the statistical analysis of the questionnaires, Mediappro teams conducted each phase of the survey themselves in order to guarantee a coherent process and high quality analysis.

An example of a cross-national project: EU Kids Online II

The EU Kids Online survey of 2010, in its first main report (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011), illustrates the second approach, as it examines how differences in age, gender, socio-economic status, etc. are fairly constant across European countries, as regards children's use of the internet and their contact with its risks. In other words, each country was treated as a distinct context precisely in order to test whether the same finding (such as parents underestimate risks online compared with children) in those different contexts; only if the similarity holds is the finding considered robust.

An example of a cross-national project: Children and their Changing Media Environment

The Children and their Changing Media Environment project (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001) exemplifies this third approach, as it sought to understand how systematic differences in education, wealth, parenting, etc. were associated with differences across countries in children's media use, including adoption of new media. Thus it examined the correlations between national wealth (e.g. GDP), or degree of ICT diffusion, and the dependent variables of children's media use; this model expects to find neither similarities nor differences, simply, but rather to find a model that applies across all nations that explains the differences observed among them, as explained to us by the authors of Chapter 1 regarding the choice of research contexts for comparison.

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FAQ 8: When is it good to use a longitudinal design?

What's the issue?

The main aim of longitudinal studies is to analyse change over time. Childhood is about change; research on children is about development and socialisation processes. Therefore it seems necessary to use research designs that are able to describe individual changes within and beyond single life spans. In principle, cross-sectional designs are able to provide at least some evidence on changes when they ask for retrospective information. However, most are limited to descriptions of the status quo.

Common practice

True longitudinal studies rely on panel data and panel methods where the same individuals are measured on more than one occasion, checking the same variables. An alternative is an omnibus (or multi-thematic) panel where the information collected varies from one point in time to another. Another alternative is the cohort study where people who belong to the same cohort are measured on more than one occasion.

Questions to consider

Studies relying on either true longitudinal design or repeated measurements of similar groups seem to be quite rare in the field of media studies. A thorough overview of studies on children's use of online media in 18 European countries between 1999 and 2006, for example, found only two examples of a longitudinal study (Staksrud, Livingstone, & Haddon, 2009). This is probably mostly due to the fact that these studies are often more complex and more expensive than cross-sectional studies.

Research projects using repeated surveys as a method for measuring social change should aim to keep changes in the research design between surveys to an absolute minimum. Duncan (1969) laid down this principle in simple terms by pointing out that, "if you want to measure change, don't change the measure." This is perhaps one of the reasons why longitudinal designs are so little used for media research as it is very difficult to adhere strictly to this principle in studies where the nature of the object of study is constantly changing. This problem is especially evident when the time span of a research project stretches over several decades. When researching (online) media, however, major changes in the object of study can occur even if the project stretches only over a few years, as changes can come into effect very quickly. Then the ideal of standardization eventually comes into conflict with the need to collect meaningful information from the respondents or participants in the study. In these cases, the measure should be changed very carefully, in order to acquire relevant and valid data.

Pitfalls to avoid

Conducting longitudinal research means collecting a large amount of data. It is therefore particularly important to maintain all data and all related documents very carefully and thoroughly from the beginning of the project to its end. This concerns questionnaires and codebooks as well as strict and consistent anonymization, particularly in qualitative research. A further important aspect is to include all participants, or as many participants as possible, in all survey waves. Researchers should avoided "losing" participants or adding new ones. To achieve this, the research team should also remain in contact with the people in the sample between the survey waves, noticing changes of residence or contact details. In an ideal case, there would be one single team to plan, conduct, and analyse the research in all the survey waves. Due to the fact that longitudinal studies extend over several years, changes within the team are almost inevitable, however. To counter this situation, the team leader should draw up a handbook that includes strict instructions and formulations on how to conduct the research and how results should be written down. This should be kept up to date at all times. Furthermore, it is important to note changes and reforms. It should be possible to reconstruct what was done at earlier stages of the

project, how, and why, even if measures and team members change. Both old and new researchers should also exchange practices within the research team.

Example of a longitudinal study: Swedish Media Panel project

A good example of true longitudinal research is the Swedish Media Panel project, covering the period between 1 January 1975 and 1 January 1998. All data are kept by the Swedish National Data Service (see http://snd.gu.se/en/start) and may be requested online. Founded by Karl Erik Rosengren and Sven Windahl in 1975, it was a long-term research programme focused on basic aspects of the use of mass media by Swedish children, adolescents, and young adults, as well as on the causes, consequences, and effects of that media use. Since 1995, the programme has been directed by Ulla Johnsson-Smaragdi.

During a long period of continuous research the Swedish Media Panel project group produced a data bank in which a large mass of data related to individual media use, its causes, effects, and consequences are stored, covering a number of cohorts and panels of children and adolescents passing through the school system and into work or continued studies during their early adulthood. In all, the bank contains data about some 5,000 children, adolescents, and young adults; their family background, activities, and relations; their relations to peers and their school experiences (including school grades etc.); their media use, lifestyles, present occupation, and activities, as well as their plans for the future. Relevant data from their parents have also been collected on several occasions (for the project summary, see www.ssd.gu.se/index.php?p=displayStudy&id=387).

In the entry of the study at the Swedish National Data Service there is a more detailed description and documentation of the project as well as key publications and the possibility of ordering the data of the project or of searching for related data (see http://snd.gu.se/en/catalogue/study/387).

Example of a long-term study: Children and Television in Iceland

An example of a long-term research project on media use in children is the Children and Television in Iceland study, in which information on media use by children aged 10–15 has been recorded regularly since 1968, thus enabling comparison over time. The project comprises seven cross-sectional school surveys spread over 41 years, with the latest data collection in 2009, and it provides a long-term perspective on the use of traditional media as well as new media and communication technologies that have been introduced over time (see Broddason, 2006).

A researcher's experience: socialization and change in research with children

In order to really deal with socialization processes, the dynamic character of the socializing factors, which determine how adolescents select media and acquire symbols useful for their daily lives over a long-term period, has to be taken into account. Various research studies point out that children employ and assign significance to media depending on their socio-cultural conditions such as the societal stratum, educational level, family form, place and size of residence, and parental income (Warren, 2003; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001; Austin, 1993; Messaris, 1983). However, the media socialization of children is influenced not only by objective socio-economic conditions, but also by personal and interaction-related processes, such as diverse family lifestyles, different forms of family, and the position of children within their peer groups that determine the ways in which media content is acquired. All these factors are subjects of change themselves. Thus, in order to get valid information on developmental changes, longitudinal designs are necessary. These designs enable us to draw a picture of the socialization process of children and the role that media play in their lives (Paus-Hasebrink, 2011; Paus-Hasebrink & Bichler, 2008).

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II. SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT

FAQ 9: How do we sample children for qualitative research?

What's the issue?

Sampling for qualitative research is essentially different from sampling for quantitative research. When sampling for quantitative research, researchers usually have in mind the representativeness of the sample, to be able to make generalizations about the population. In qualitative research, the aim, however, is not generalizing, but explaining the phenomena as comprehensively as possible – from the viewpoint of the social actors involved in the phenomenon under study – focusing on specific meanings and practices. It is not the purpose of the qualitative study to determine how typical a phenomenon is for the population. Researchers do not usually want to make inferences beyond their sample.

Common practice

- Children for focus groups or interviews, and sites for observation, are sampled through a theoretical sampling that is based on researchers' decisions about what characteristics are important for the sample according to the research questions.
- Researchers can draw a sample from a quantitative sample by asking children at the end of survey whether they are willing to participate in focus groups or interviews as well.
- If researchers only do qualitative research, they can sample children at schools, through their own or their children's social network, or through parents if dealing with younger children. Schools and homes are suitable places for recruiting children because they also provide contexts for the interview/focus groups.
- Whether doing online or offline qualitative research about peculiar or specific topics (e.g. focus groups with young IT experts), it is easier to sample at web discussion forums focused around that particular topic. This way, it is easier to sample from specific populations that are difficult to "recognize on the street". Another place for recruiting interviewees and focus group participants is represented by social network sites.
- Try to be as specific as possible about the sample of children to be included in the qualitative study because that allows you to be more exploratory.
- For conducting focus groups with a broader age range (e.g. 8–18), invite children of similar ages (e.g. 8–9, 10–11, 12–13, etc.) to be in the same groups.
- When researching sensitive topics, such as online risky experiences, or gendered practices, evaluate separating boys and girls.
- The size of a sample for qualitative interviews is good enough if ranging from 20–40 (if you need to compare findings, you can double it). When dealing with a very specific group of children, the sample can be even smaller. Anything beyond 50 can only mean putting in extra effort, which can be better used to be much more careful about the consistency of interpretation and analysis.

Pitfalls to avoid

One common pitfall is insisting on representativeness when sampling for qualitative research. No matter how accurately you sample to ensure a representative sample, your efforts will not pay off in qualitative research.

Researchers will never be able to do a big enough number of qualitative interviews or focus groups to ensure a sample large enough for generalizations, which they are not aiming for in the first place. Always try to bear in mind that you are not aiming for generalizations. Researchers are not trying to tell how many people think that, but why they think as they do, and what the reasons are behind that thinking. The qualitative part of a study can always be followed up by a quantitative survey to test for generalizations.

Questions to consider

How many qualitative interviews are really needed? How long should the observation of a specific site (e.g. a school yard) take? How many focus groups are needed, considering that a series of them are needed if that is the main method of data collection? Based on which criteria will the focus groups be divided?

A researcher's experience

In a qualitative research project investigating, through interviews and observations, why only some middle-class households adopted cable television, our research team contracted a recruitment company to locate 10 households with, and 10 households without, cable. We stipulated that the households should be from the London area for, though less than ideal, it was convenient for the research team since the project timeline was short. Mistakenly, as it turned out, we assumed that the agency had a database from which to draw a sample from all over London. Instead, we received a sample entirely based in Potters Bar, a small town just north of London, where a large proportion of residents commute into London each day. Worse still, we discovered later that one recruiter had gone from door to door in a particular part of Potters Bar, while the other had approached people shopping on a Saturday morning, both thus producing rather homogenous samples. The lesson to learn is to ask the recruitment agency how they work, to specify in the contract that the sample should, as much as possible, reflect the diversity in the population sampled and, if concerns remain, to check with the interviewees themselves just how they were recruited. (Leslie Haddon, UK)

References and further resources

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FAQ 10: How do you sample children for quantitative research?

What's the issue?

Sampling for quantitative research depends on whether or not researchers are aiming for a probabilistic sample from which they would like to draw inferences about the population (i.e., to what extent sample statistics reflect the population parameters). A number of issues usually have to be considered (choosing the population, the sampling frame, the way of sampling, and the sample size). When aiming for a representative sample, things get more complicated as researchers need a list of children to sample from. This can be quite difficult. However, they could establish a list of all schools in the area they are interested in studying, and sample children from there.

Common practice

- When conducting a survey with children and parents, the household could be used as unit of analysis.
- If financial or time sources do not permit face-to-face surveying at home, children could be sampled by school (e.g. a sample based on clusters), covering different regions of the country. Instead of individual children, sample groups of children occurring naturally in the population could be sampled – this is known as cluster sampling.
- If researchers want various subgroups (e.g. age subgroups or gender subgroups of children) in the sample to also be representative, stratified random sampling can be used, which combines stratified sampling with random sampling. For example, if researchers wanted a stratified random sample of boys and girls from the final year of a primary school, they would first separate the entire population of the last year of the primary school pupils into two groups, one all boys and the other all girls. To complete the sampling they would then independently select a random sample from each stratum (a random sample of boys and another of girls).
- Researchers can also do a non-probabilistic sample of children, bearing in mind that no inferences beyond their sample are possible. However, studies with non-probabilistic samples (e.g. quota sample, purposive sample) are still valuable as they can be very informative, and also point to the children beyond the sample who most probably have very similar socio-demographic characteristics to those included in the sample. It is okay to conduct such studies as long as the aim is not for statistical inferences from the samples to the population. The researchers operate only within descriptive interpretations.

Questions to consider

What size should the sample be? Do you need probabilistic sampling? Can you afford to sample probabilistically? What kind of natural clusters of children are available in the population? Do you also need various subgroups in the sample to be representative?

Pitfalls to avoid

- Sampling children requires consent from the parent or legal guardian, as children are underage and cannot commit to such decisions on their own.
- Sampling requires that all parameters of concern are taken into consideration (e.g. socio-economic background, gender, etc.). Missing one parameter of interest, or not fully representing it, could bias the results.
- Time needs to be taken to ensure that the sample is well defined and complete (e.g. a sample of children who only speak English does not represent all children in the country, as a population might include minority ethnic children who do not speak English).

A researcher's experience

In designing a national survey for children, as it was too expensive to interview children in their households, it was decided to sample children by schools. This sample was based on clusters covering different regions of the country. After negotiation with the Portuguese Minister of Education, it was agreed that in each of five regions, four elementary schools attended by children (6–15 years) would be selected based on the criteria of urban/rural contexts, children from minority ethnic groups and socio-economic status (SES). Based on lists of students in each of the 20 schools, a proportional sample of children by age would be designed and 30 students from each school were then chosen randomly. This way, the sampling would involve 600 students.

After parental consent had been obtained, the sample would receive a self-completion questionnaire to be answered at school, outside the classroom. Parents would receive another self-completion questionnaire, given to them by the child in the study. These questionnaires were to be returned to the school, in closed envelopes, and the school would send them to the research project.

This initial design for a national survey proved to be too difficult and time-consuming. It involved several factors, starting with the agreement of the schools randomly selected, and ending with the parental consent of all the students randomly sampled.

Instead, it was decided to sample children by schools in the greater Lisbon area, which is the leading area for internet penetration in households and the area with more migrant children. The Minister of Education provided us with a list of the public elementary schools covering compulsory education in this area. From this list, 20 schools were selected based on the criteria of urban/rural contexts, children from minority ethnic groups and SES. The first 11 schools that accepted the idea were our sample. Each school chose a class per year from the 4th to the 8th grade, providing an average of 90 children as a starting point. Parents were asked for informed consent. In each school, children who had parental consent were presented with the aims of the research and invited to participate, under the assurance of privacy and confidentiality. The self-completion questionnaire was answered at school, in the presence of an assistant, a member of the research team. Parents received another self-completion questionnaire, given to them by the child in the study. These questionnaires were returned to the school, in closed envelopes. In order to provide identification, children and parents' questionnaires had the same code number.

In the end, a total of 810 questionnaires answered by children at school and 630 questionnaires answered by their parents were sent to the research team, which might be considered quite a positive number. Parents who answered this questionnaire differed from the national profile – they were better informed and had higher levels of education. Also, parents of younger children (9–11) were overrepresented compared to the parents of older ones (12–14), and this may have different meanings, including the possibility that the older children may have resisted involving their parents. (Cristina Ponte, Portugal)

In the TIRO research project we organized two panels of 20 Dutch- and 20 French-speaking teenagers (aged 12–18). We interviewed them, had online conversations with them on several occasions, and asked them to keep a diary on their everyday life and media use. For sampling those panels we went to different sites where young people are present (schools, youth movements such as the scouts, and youth clubs, e.g. for sport, theatre), and we used our own social networks, although no close relatives were selected, only casual acquaintances. In order to manage the subjectivity in the sampling process (two researchers were involved and we wanted to avoid discrepancy between the Flemish and Walloon panel), we used a theoretical sampling matrix. First, the hundreds of young people we recruited were asked to provide brief information about their social background, ICT use, and leisure. Based on a literature review we then decided to sample both panels by means of three criteria that seemed to be distinct for explaining the diversity and heterogeneity of young people's internet practices: gender, age (12–13, 14–16, 17–18), and SES (reflecting the economic and cultural capital of the parents). Based on these three socio-demographic characteristics we drew a matrix with 18 cells and looked for young people who met the cell criteria that were preconceived (e.g. one boy aged 12–13 with low SES, one girl aged 14–16 with high SES). To gain insight into future trends in ICT use, we also selected in each panel one teenager who showed an intensive

pattern of ICT use. This sampling procedure (in stages and pre-structured) proved to be useful in guaranteeing the diversity of the panel. We wanted especially to avoid assembling a middle-class panel, since many qualitative studies seem to suffer from this bias. Yet we did not succeed in involving young people with a minority ethnic background in our panel. More specific sampling methods seem to be required for including those groups. (Joke Bauwens, Belgium)

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FAQ 11: Is it okay to interview parents as informants on their children?

What's the issue?

Ideally, to understand how children use the internet at home, both children and parents would be interviewed, so as to triangulate the two data sources, to permit parents to provide a check on responses from young children, and to permit children to report on their experiences themselves, especially since parents may not be aware of the range of their activities and perceptions. However, this is complicated in terms of both recruitment and data analysis, and thus it is a relatively expensive approach to research. Researchers are therefore often left with having to decide which one to interview when their resources are limited.

Common practice

- Rules of thumb are to include both children and parents (or teachers) as respondents, wherever possible.
- One cost-efficient route to combining data sources is to ask just a few, key questions of parents when recruiting children.
- If both can be included, children should be reassured that parents will not see their responses.
- In reporting, care must be taken when assuming that one set of responses are more "correct" than the other – it is probably safest to regard the discrepancy as indicating the upper and lower bounds for a response.
- Note that, as a rule, children tend to report higher estimates of internet use and risk, and lower estimates of parental mediation and internet-related anxieties, compared with parents.

Pitfalls to avoid

If only parents/adults are interviewed, care must be taken in interpreting their claim if they relate to phenomena to which their access may be limited (e.g. accounts of what children do in their bedroom, in private, on their mobile, or at school).

Only interviewing children has other disadvantages: most notably, it is difficult to get reliable information on socio-economic status (whether parental income, education, or some combination thereof), and so findings regarding inequalities or exclusion cannot be obtained. One solution is to sample schools in more and less advantaged neighbourhoods. Hence, for example, the Mediappro project, which surveyed 7,393 12- to 18-year-olds in nine countries, used a stratified sample of schools in which researchers conducted a pen-and-paper survey (see www.mediappro.org).

A researcher's experience

> The SAFT surveys interviewed both children and parents, using the same questions for each. Where children and parents gave fairly similar answers (e.g. 31% of children and 21% of parents said the child did instant messaging), the 'truth' may be taken to lie in between. But where answers were different (e.g. 56% of children but only 8% of parents said the child downloaded music), it was clear that relying on parents to provide reliable information about children was insufficient and misleading. Furthermore, significant findings emerged precisely from these discrepancies. For example, since 64% of children said their parent never sat with them when they went online, while only 11% of parents said they never sat with their child, one can conclude both that children may be 'saving face' by under-reporting how often a parent sat with them, but also that parents were both relatively ignorant of their children's actual use and overconfident of their own safety practices (Elisabeth Staksrud, Norway).

Example of a study using only answers from parents

Less useful, by contrast, is the reliance in the Eurobarometer survey on adults reporting about children. Although this survey has provided much useful information regarding children and parents' internet use across Europe, it is significant

that survey respondents were adults over 15 years old who were responsible for, or caretakers of, a child under 17. Thus, not only does this survey of children's internet use rely on reporting by adults, but these adults may not be the child's parent (but could be a childcare employee or older sibling, for example).

Example of a study using parents as informants as well as children

The recruitment strategy used by the Youth Internet Safety Survey in the US efficiently obtained two sources of data (asking a few questions of parents when recruiting children), got informed consent from both parents and children, and established an appropriate context for a sensitive interview, in a single telephone call, as follows:

> When contacting a household, interviewers from a national survey research firm screened for regular use of the internet by a youth in the target age group. Interviewers then asked to speak with the parent who knew the most about the youth's internet use, conducted a short interview assessing household rules and parental concerns about internet use, and gathered demographic characteristics. The interviewer requested permission from the parent to speak with the youth. Parents were assured of the confidentiality of the interview and were informed that the interview would include questions about 'sexual material your child may have seen.' Upon achieving parental consent, interviewers described the study to the youth and obtained his or her oral consent. Youth interviews, which lasted about half an hour, were scheduled at the youth's convenience and arranged for times when he/she could talk freely. (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001, p. 3011)

References and further resources

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FAQ 12: How can I recruit particular subgroups of children?

What's the issue?

Sometimes researchers want to study a specific population or particular subgroups of children, which may not be easy to recognize or reach through the usual ways of recruiting. This may be the case for quantitative, and even more so for qualitative, research, which is often used when there is little known about the phenomena under study.

Common practice

- Internet discussion forums or mailing lists on a vast amount of topics that are available nowadays can provide a useful way of recruiting particular subgroups of older children and teenagers. Researchers could go to a specific high school forum to recruit teenagers for a study about their use of media in everyday life.

- If researchers want various subgroups (e.g. age subgroups or gender subgroups of children) in the sample, they could use stratified random sampling, which combines stratified sampling with random sampling. For example, if researchers wanted a stratified random sample of boys and girls from the last year of primary school, they would first separate the entire population of the last year primary school pupils into two groups, one all boys and the other all girls. To complete the sampling they would then independently select a random sample from each stratum (a random sample of boys and another of girls).

Questions to consider

Particular subgroups that deserve special attention in research on the use of ICT are socially vulnerable and underprivileged children. Recruiting young children from this background requires more effort to gain the confidence of the parents who are often not acquainted with or even suspicious of the formal and asymmetrical relationship between the (academic) researcher and themselves. Doing research with teenagers with a socially less privileged background urges researchers to be reflective about their own social position, their idiom and their attitude, and how this all affects the research process.

Researchers' experiences

In the first attempt to conduct a questionnaire on mobile phone use by young teenagers in Greece, I thought of using the Greek School Network (GSN) (ideally, this would have meant that the designed questionnaire would electronically reach teenagers across the country, thus allowing me to have a representative sample in terms of geography, urban area, socio-economic status, and so on, according to my needs). I soon discovered that the bureaucracy involved in dealing with the Greek Ministry of Education meant that it would take anything between three and six months in order to have an answer as to whether or not I would be allowed access to the GSN; providing I did receive a positive answer, I would still need another few months to select a limited number of school units which I would then have to visit physically; conducting research over the internet proved impossible. In order to circumvent this problem, I used informal networks: I approached my mathematician at my old *frontistirio* (all students in Greece are driven, sooner or later, to such institutions where they practice for their A levels at school, for a fee), now coaching a new generation of high school students. I bypassed all the bureaucratic prerequisites and other practical obstacles of the official process in the corridors of the *frontistirio* and managed to gain access to approximately 200 teenagers aged 15–18. I had 30 more questionnaires gathered through a Master's student of mine who used his connections at his old school and handed out the questionnaire to one classroom. Lesson learned: there are always ways to improvise and overcome the inflexibility of the system. (Lisa Tsaliki, Greece)

In the TIRO research project we wanted to include young people with a Moroccan or Turkish background (the biggest Muslim minority ethnic group in Belgium) in the qualitative research, but failed. We underestimated the

hesitancy of both the teenagers and their parents to participate in academic research that represented the (Belgian) establishment in society. It also occurred to us that the youth movements and clubs we visited to recruit teenagers were predominantly 'white', so we had to look for other settings and intermediaries. Since we were not prepared for this, we ran out of time, and had to bury this plan. (Joke Bauwens, Belgium)

References and further resources

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Greene, S. & Hogan, D. (2005). *Researching children's experiences: Methods and approaches*. London: Sage Publications.

FAQ 13: What are the ethical issues involved in researching children?

What's the issue?

With regard to research ethics when interviewing children, the most common issues raised in the introduction of interviews concern data confidentiality, the purpose of the study and of interviews, as well as the use of audio or video recording of the interviews. Less often, there are references to the voluntary character of the interviews, the right of children not to answer questions if they do not want to, and the signing of consent forms. In any case, not all studies treat issues of research ethics in the same way, and not all emphasize the same aspects of research ethics.

Common practice

- Seeking to safeguard the interests of all affected by the research, including considering the possible consequences of the study or the misuse of the results.
- A commitment to listening to and including the perspectives of children and young people in the research.
- Inviting freely given written consent from all children participating in the research, and from the parent or guardian of those under 16, while ensuring that all understand that they can refuse any question or withdraw at any time.
- Informing children and parents, through discussion and the provision of age-appropriate leaflets, what the research is about, how it will be disseminated, and how their data will be stored.
- Keeping all data confidential, removing all personal identifiers, and assigning pseudonyms where appropriate, plus storing the data in accordance with the Data Protection Act (UK).
- Informing participants that if they divulge information suggesting that they or others are at risk of harm, the researcher has a duty of care to report this and to ensure support for the child (and to inform the participant that this is occurring).
- Providing a debriefing after each research interview, leaving all participants with a written record of the researchers' names and contact information.
- Providing feedback on the research process to all who ask for it (e.g. sending a copy of the summary report to participating schools or homes if requested).

Pitfalls to avoid

Avoid upsetting or offending participants. Avoid introducing new and sensitive information to children (e.g. introducing the idea of pornographic sites to children previously unaware of them).

Questions to consider

What are the ethical guidelines that are to be followed in the country where your research will be carried out? What information should participants know before deciding to take part (or not) in your research? When is parental consent necessary in order to involve children in the research?

Researchers' experiences

> I started my visit by explaining the objective of my presence to the children. I informed them that their participation was not compulsory and that they could refuse to take part. From a total of 20 children and teenagers, only two girls refused to participate and left the room. After that, I asked if I could record the conversation, so that I could remember at home what we had been talking about and their opinions. Everyone agreed. At the beginning of each conversation, I also tried a different approach, to find out more about their interests, intentions for the future, desires, and so on, in order to create a familiar environment and to 'break the ice'. It worked quite well, since they got much more comfortable and, when the interview started, they weren't constrained. (Cátia Candeias, Portugal)

In relation to consent, my first concern was to capture the teacher's interest and obtain approval to approach the children. Then it was explained to the children that their participation was not compulsory and that they could simply say no. None of the children refused to take part. In fact they were keen to participate. The parents were not directly asked for consent. The classroom in Portugal is the teachers' domain, and they are trusted to decide what activities happen inside it. The only situations in which parents are usually consulted are those when the activities involve children leaving the school. Their consent was, nonetheless, implicitly given by answering the questionnaires addressed to them. In fact, some parents took the opportunity to praise the research and to call for more projects assessing the provision of children's television. The children were asked if they agreed to the use of a tape recorder so that I could remember what they said afterwards. No one disagreed and they were all interested in listening to the recordings of their voices at the end. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

The UK Children Go Online project set out to interview and survey children aged 9–19 about their internet use, including their experience of various risks (pornography, bullying, race hate sites, etc.). This involved asking sensitive questions; in a face-to-face interview, children may feel pressured to reply; in a written survey, the researcher may not know how children respond to the questions asked. In addition to careful pilot research to check the phrasing of all questions, informed consent from respondents is crucial. The research team first read the guidelines provided by professional associations (in the UK, these are produced by the major children's charities, by the professional associations for academic psychology and sociology, by the Market Research Society and, internationally, by the Association of Internet Researchers). A set of ethical principles for the project was drawn up, applying and adapting those produced by these associations (this was submitted to the researchers' university ethics committee, and posted on the project website, www.children-go-online.net). (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

An appropriate ethical framework is especially important when researching children and young people. Children's views are to be respected (Morrow & Richards, 1996) as well as their freedom to take (or not take) part in a research project. In our research we followed the ethical guidelines required in Chile for research carried out at schools. These include the obtaining of informed consent from each school and from the children participating in both school-based surveys and interviews. During our first encounter with each group of respondents they were told that they were not obliged to participate in our study, and that if they wanted to, they could drop out at any stage of the data collection. At the beginning of each interview we also emphasized that they could avoid answering any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. Moreover, the anonymity of our respondents was guaranteed and upheld throughout the whole research process, and consequently all the names used are, obviously, fictitious. (Verónica Donoso, Belgium)

Examples of forms for obtaining children and parent consent

Obtaining consent of children: example from *Children, young people and new media* (Shade, 2002–05):

This research is being done to learn about the ways in which the internet, specifically internet services (like shopping, downloading music, and using internet chat) is being integrated into your everyday life. For this specific project, I'm interested in how children are using the internet. You've got a copy of the information sheet about the project. My main goal is.... Participating in this project is entirely voluntary. If you would rather not, you don't have to go through this interview. If you don't mind talking to me, I'd like to either tape record or video record this just to make sure I have an accurate report of what our conversation is like. If I videotape the interview, I will be recording you as well as some of things you do on the internet screen. If you feel uncomfortable with this I can instead take notes by hand. And if I you agree to tape and then change your mind, or realize you said something that makes you uncomfortable, just reach out and turn it off, or wave at me and I will, and then we can erase the tape. In other words, I want you to be as comfortable as possible with this. Is it okay to go ahead with a few questions? As we go through, if you don't want to answer a question, that's fine, or if you aren't sure what I'm getting at, please ask. This is not a test. There are no right or wrong answers. We just want to learn what using the internet means to you.

Example from *Cyberbullying report to Anti-Bullying Alliance* (Smith *et al.*, 2006), regarding confidentiality and anonymity of answers for children aged 11–16 who participated in the survey:

> Our names are _____ and we are researchers at Goldsmiths College which is part of the University of London. We are interested in how children and adolescents get on with each other in and out of school. You do not have to answer this questionnaire, but we would be grateful if you did. Anything that you write will be treated as most confidential. You do not have to put your names on the questionnaire. Your teachers, the headteacher and your classmates will not be shown your answers. No one in the school will know what you write, so please answer truthfully. Please only turn over each page when you are told to do so.

Good practice example of youth consent from the Finkelhor Survey (child interview) (Finkelhor, 2006):

> I would like to ask you some questions that are part of a study about young people using the internet. When I say 'use the internet,' I mean going 'online.' The interview will last about half an hour. To thank you for your help, we will send you a check for $10. The questions have to do with things that have happened to you on the internet, including whether you have come across people or pictures that made you uncomfortable or upset, along with some questions about safety in other areas of your life.

> This is part of a national survey of 2,000 young people, ages 10 to 17. You were chosen completely at random to represent the ideas and experiences of young people. You don't have to talk to us if you don't want to, but your help will make a big difference. Everything you say will be completely confidential. We are not allowed to tell your parents, your school, or anyone else anything you tell us.

> We would like you to try to answer every question that you can, but if there is any question that you don't want to answer, that will be OK. You can stop the interview at any time. Also, if there is any question that you don't understand, please say so. If there are too many people around for you to talk freely, just let me know and I can call back later.

Obtaining parental consent:

> Thank you for answering our questions.... It will help our study a lot if we can talk to your [age] year old also. We want to find out what kinds of situations young people come across on the internet, what they've learned about internet safety, and what kinds of life experiences make young people more or less protected when they are online.

> To thank your [son/daughter] for [his/her] help with this survey, we will send [him/her] a cheque for $10. The interview would take about half an hour, and we can schedule it at [her/his] convenience. Some of the questions will be about sexual material your child may have seen. [Her/his] answers will be completely confidential. Your child's participation is voluntary, and we can skip over any questions that [s/he] doesn't want to answer. (Once again, you can call our toll free number [1-877-......] to confirm information about this study. We would also be happy to send you a letter explaining more about who we are and what this survey is about before the interview, if you would like that.) Would it be possible to interview [him/her] now, or would another time be better? (Panayiota Tsatsou and Sonia Livingstone, UK)

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FAQ 14: Should I provide incentives for children to take part in the research?

What's the issue?

Researchers are of different opinions when it comes to rewarding children for taking part in research. Some report that it is useful to motivate them; others claim that children should take part voluntarily.

Common practice

The researcher can, at the end, offer a small gift as a token of gratitude. However, this should only happen at the end of the interview.

Pitfalls to avoid

It is best to avoid promising children valuable incentives which can overstimulate their participation and therefore put in danger the quality of the findings.

Researchers' experiences

I did not provide any incentives and the children were free not to participate, but I did choose to give each child, after the research was completed, a symbolic token of their participation (a diploma of participation and a candy bag for each), though the ideal gift would have been to actually give them the opportunity to put their contributions into practice (I was asked several times whether their stories would indeed be adapted for television). I suppose that, as with adults, it is important to pass on the idea that their contribution is really going to matter. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

Marks obviously cannot be given. A strategy I used to motivate pupils to write substantial political essays was to give 'pluses' or 'small marks' (which were summed into real marks at the end of the term by the teacher) for the length and quality of argumentation, regardless of the content and direction of statements. The strategy justified itself: I received several solid essays representing a wide variety of opinions on sensitive political issues. (Veronika Kalmus, Estonia)

I encountered a problem regarding the seriousness with which young teenagers dealt with it. There were a number of instances where responses given were anecdotal, rude, even 'spicy' to the extent that they had to be disregarded. Although the respondents filled in the questionnaire in the classroom (rather than at home), it appears that some of them did not take it seriously enough all of the time. Solution: I'm not sure there is one. It's not as if they can be relied upon to give sincere and articulate answers in exchange for something (a gift, a prize) because, even in this case, there is no guarantee they will 'behave'. (Lisa Tsaliki, Greece)

This is a question on which custom and practice varies considerably, by country, by academic discipline, and by the age of the child. Psychologists are more used to proving incentives than sociologists; for example, teenagers expect them more than young children. There can be no hard and fast rules, therefore. In the UK Children Go Online project, children who participated in the focus groups, individual interviews, or the survey were given an incentive – typically a voucher that could be spent in a high street shop (for clothing, music, or books). The amounts varied depending on time commitment but were around 15–35 Euros. This is clearly an expense that must be built into the project budget in advance. For reasons of taxation, it may need to be termed an incentive to cover time and expenses, rather than a payment. Usefully, since a signature to acknowledge receipt is needed, this could be requested at the same time that the ethical consent form is signed. Incidentally, for family interviews I observe

that, although the voucher has been offered to the family, it is generally handed to the child. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

![www.eukidsonline.net]

III. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

FAQ 15: What are the best ways to interview children?

What's the issue?

In general, good practice in interviewing children applies to everyone, including adults. But since children are generally interviewed by adults, and since they may not find it so easy to express themselves, researchers have developed a range of strategies for interviewing children. In particular, a standard, lengthy series of questions and answers may not work as well for children as for adults.

Common practice

- Try to break up the interview into meaningful subsections, each with their own short introduction, mixing one-to-one interviews with other kinds of tasks such as asking children to draw a picture relevant to the topic, or using puppets or dolls in role-play games for very young children, or using various pen-and-paper exercises.

- Some children may feel uneasy or afraid of making a mistake. Encourage the child and make him/her feel comfortable in answering despite what the answer may be, even if this may mean disclosing sensitive information.

- Use cards with images or words on them (e.g. pictures of media) and ask the child to sort them into meaningful groups (e.g. Which are cool? Or which could you not live without?). Ask them to explain their classification. Include some blank cards in case they want to add something. Be ready to respond to the needs of different children who may have different needs. Not every child will appreciate working with cards or words, so vary interviewing patterns depending on your audience.

- Ask them to draw a picture related to an event or topic and then to tell a story to go with this. The researcher and the child may play turn-taking games, switching the roles of teller and told.

- In group interviews, children may talk about the topic in pairs, and then each pair can tell another what they discussed.

- You could construct a mind map, using a large piece of paper, and invite the children to call out ideas or examples linked to the central topic.

- Children may find it hard to sit still, and so try to give them reasons to move about if the interview is lengthy. Alternatively, try changing your body position.

- If asking them about something nearby or in the room, you could ask them to show you (e.g. Can I see your favourite website? Can you show me how your phone does that? Can I see a story you wrote?).

- Towards the end of the interview, it is good practice to feedback to the child(ren) the understanding you have gained, and ask them if it's right or if they wish to correct or add anything.

- Don't forget to remind them that the research is anonymous and confidential and that they can stop at any time. This might make them feel more relaxed.

- Be careful about your clothing – if it is too formal, you risk alienating your young audience; if it is too casual or too trendy, you may come across as "trying too hard" to impress them.

- Whenever possible, it's best to avoid having other adults (parents, teacher) supervising the interview or focus groups, as this may impinge on how spontaneously children respond.

Pitfalls to avoid

- Never give a child the impression there is a right answer, nor laugh at them if they make a mistake. Avoid leading questions at all times (not "Why do you like the internet" but "Do you like the internet? Why do you say that?").

- Take care that your response options are not implicitly leading: if you ask, do you spend 1, 2, or 3 hours a day online, neither the child who never goes online nor the child who spends 5 hours online will tell you this.

- Think about the order of the questions you ask – begin with a warm-up of easy questions rather than diving straight in to more revealing ones.

- Try not to assume you know what a website, or story, or image means – ask the child to show you, and then ask him/her to describe it ("Why do you like that? What's good about it?" Etc.).

Researchers' experiences

In focus groups with 9- to 11-year-olds, we got the children talking about the internet by telling them a story thus: 'an Alien from another world has been watching people here on the planet Earth very carefully. It has been able to see everything but meeting you is the first opportunity it has had to ask questions about things it has seen. It wants to know what the internet is, and you have to explain….' The researcher placed a large sheet of paper (flip chart) on the table and gave each child a coloured felt pen. In the middle was a picture of a little green alien with speech bubbles around it: the children were asked to fill out the speech bubbles in answer to questions like, what is the internet, where do you use it, what is the best or worst thing about the internet, what is fun or boring about it? Later in the discussion, they were also asked if there were rules for using it. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

We were examining the use of social media among 9- to 12-year-olds in Greece. During a focus group, a 10-year-old made a reference to pornography, teasing one of her friends. We managed to respond instantly, picking up the new discussion thread. Despite the sensitive nature of this experience, the children in the focus group opened up as a result of the relationship of trust we've built with them, thus helping us improve an already existing dataset with rich new data. The bottom line is that interviewers need to be alert and ready to respond to whichever (new) turn the discussion may take, if this is useful for their research scope. Another time, the teacher who was initially present at a focus group which was taking place in the classroom, left the room following our advice; the children immediately opened up and became more talkative and spontaneous after her departure. (Greek team)

When interviewing people about their use of the internet, I have often found it helpful to give examples of particular search terms or sites that they might visit, to encourage interviewees to go beyond generalities and to respond in more detail. Once when interviewing a group of young teenagers about their use of the internet for music, I gave examples of the kinds of music or bands they might search for (e.g. 'Suppose you wanted to find some music by Boyzone, how would you go about it?'). My interest lay in their internet literacy (did they search for leisure content with more competence than when they searched for schoolwork?). But my examples of bands were a couple of years out of date, and so in one simple question, I lost all the rapport I had carefully built up with the group, reminding them that I was old and adult, quite unlike them, and so occasioning great hilarity and scorn amongst the group. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

References and further resources

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FAQ 16: What are the best ways to construct a survey questionnaire?

What's the issue?

Writing a survey questionnaire requires care and attention to the design and wording, as well as to the means of administering the survey and recording responses, especially when the respondents are children. The answers should be reliable (i.e., they provide consistent measures in comparable situations) and valid (i.e., they correspond to what they are intended to measure). In that sense, a good questionnaire maximizes the relationship between the answers given with respect to a particular question and what the research wants to measure through that question (facts, perceptions, experiences, etc.).

Common practice

- Once survey objectives are stated explicitly, the questions to be asked should be clear.
- The questionnaire should be structured into sections that address particular issues or topics, and that follow one from the other. The first questions should be particularly interesting/easy to answer.
- It should begin with a brief introductory text, and then provide transitional statements to give a conversational tone to the interview and to help the respondents to follow the shift from one topic to the next. This contributes to the perception of the questionnaire as a "coherent whole."
- Almost all questions in a questionnaire should be asked using a standardized format for both question and answer, in order to produce answers that can be readily compared and that the child can produce reliably.
- For each section, state whether single or multiple answers are permitted. Try to convey the same type of information in the same way throughout the questionnaire (Dillman, 2000), and use answer spaces consistently.
- Questions may be asked using either closed questions (i.e., a list of acceptable responses is provided) or open questions (i.e., no list of acceptable questions is provided). Although open questions permit the researcher to obtain unanticipated answers or answers in the respondent's own words, they take a long time to complete. Moreover, the closed questions produce more analytically useful and reliable data.
- Standard response options include agree/disagree questions (these are generally preferable to yes/no questions), and a scale is often used. A five-point scale suffices for most purposes, and it is useful to code the negative pole as "1" and the positive pole as "5": for example, "strongly disagree", "disagree", "partly agree and partly disagree", "agree", "strongly agree".

Pitfalls to avoid

- Format and wording pitfalls must be avoided, especially when the self-completion questionnaire is employed (common in research with children). In self-completion surveys, the formatting is even more important than in other data collection procedures, as in this case there are no trained interviewers to guide and encourage the respondents. It works best if a self-completion questionnaire is self-explanatory (no further instructions required), if only closed questions are included, and if there are few question formats (to reduce confusion). It is important that all respondents interpret the question in the same way, so words that are ambiguous or that may be understood in different ways should be avoided.
- A questionnaire is poorly designed if it is cluttered, gives too many instructions, or does not leave enough space between questions. Complex skip patterns (i.e., occasions where the question flow varies depending on the responses given) are a common fault and should be kept to a minimum (if necessary, use arrows and boxes that communicate skips without verbal instructions). The layout should clearly differentiate instructions, questions, and response options.
- If a conversational tone in the sequence of questions is omitted, children in particular may feel distant from the context and subject matter of the research. However, the tone should be fairly neutral, not judgemental or patronizing.

- For each question, any ambiguous words and concepts need to be clarified. Yet at the same time, questions need to be short and simple. Long complex questions are best handled as a series of short simple questions. At the same time, a "multi-question approach" lengthens the questionnaire, which can lead to non-response, so consider the right amount of these.

- In order to ensure good measurement, unless measuring the knowledge is the goal of the question, all respondents should have access to the information needed to answer the question from their experience. What constitutes an adequate answer should be consistently communicated.

- Try to avoid strong negative words (forbid, ban, restrain, oppose).

- Try to avoid a long list of response choices in order not to confuse respondents.

- Overall, lengthy questionnaires should also be avoided when children are participants. It can be tiring and lower the response rates or even affect the accuracy of the answers.

Questions to consider

After a pilot test, why are some questions not answered? Are all response options used appropriately? Do some answers suggest response biases that could be corrected? How long does the questionnaire take to complete? Did all respondents understand what they were meant to do? Are all the questions really needed? What exactly is being measured with each question and how will the data be analysed?

When constructing a survey questionnaire, ask yourself three questions: (1) Can the respondent understand the questions? (2) Is the respondent able to answer the questions? (3) Is the respondent willing to answer the questions? Be cautious of using common words/expressions. To the question: "What proportion of your evening viewing time do you spend watching news programmes?", Belson (1981) found in his research that only one-quarter of respondents interpreted "proportion" as a "part", "fraction", or "percentage". About one-third saw it as quantitative such as "how long", "how many hours", or "how often". A larger group tapped other dimensions entirely such as "when they watch", "which programmes", or "which channels". Therefore, it is important to avoid such common words or to try to be as specific with what you mean to ask.

An example of the importance of pilot testing

Mainly because of budget and time constraints our questionnaire was designed and piloted in the country of residence of the researcher (Belgium) instead of in the country where the data collection had to take place (Chile). Moreover, the questionnaire was piloted with 1st year bachelor students instead of with school children (the actual sample population). As a consequence, the English pilot questionnaire was not really useful in revealing essential problems such as language issues present in the Spanish version. Moreover, and probably due to the fact that the questionnaire was piloted with an older university population, we were not able to detect on time that our questionnaire was too lengthy for a secondary school population. (Verónica Donoso, Belgium)

References and further resources

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FAQ 17: How do I order the questions in a survey or interview?

What's the issue?

The questions to be addressed to respondents have to be structured in a way that will enable smooth communication between interviewers and respondents, retaining the neutral character of the interviews and facilitating the response task.

Common practice

- The questionnaire should be structured into sections that address particular issues or topics, and that follow one from the other. The first questions should be particularly interesting/easy to answer.
- It should begin with a brief introductory text, continue through a number of easy warm-up questions, and only ask the more difficult-to-answer questions afterwards. It should close with the routine demographic questions.
- Transitional statements in moving from one set of questions to the next should be provided, to give a conversational tone to the interview and to help the respondents to follow the shift from one topic to the next. This contributes to the perception of the questionnaire as a "coherent whole."
- The introduction is of critical importance for establishing a rapport with child respondents in particular.
- In each set of questions, the movement should be from general to specific questions.
- The question order has some effect on response error. Thus, a researcher needs to decide which questions will come first in the questionnaire, the question sequencing, and the use of transition statements.

Pitfalls to avoid

You could make children uncomfortable by asking from the very beginning questions that require them to use a lot of effort to answer. Also problematic is the inclusion of topics and issues that are addressed by one question only (i.e., without follow-ups), diminishing the reliability of the collected data.

A researcher's experience

> In semi-structured interviews it often happens that the children/adolescents are inspired to talk about something (by association during the interview topics and comments from others), and my experience is that it is important to pursue these directions and then make sure to get back on track. Even if the new direction regards something the interviewer planned to discuss at a later point it is best to follow the inspiration of the interviewees – then the interviewer may always follow up at the planned point. This is an exhausting strategy as the interviewer has to be really alert and good at keeping the overview. But it pays. (Gitte Stald, Denmark)

References and further resources

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FAQ 18: What are good tips for phrasing questions in a survey to children?

What's the issue?

Phrasing defines the extent to which children understand the questionnaire. It also influences the extent to which they feel comfortable with the survey overall (i.e., they might feel uncomfortable answering questions they do not fully understand or feel are not age-relevant).

Common practice

Researchers recognize the value of the following suggestions:

- Keep questions as short as possible. Ask one question at a time.
- Pilot questions before finalizing the questionnaire to ensure children understand what you are asking and that the response options fit their answers.
- Ask children to respond to affirmative not negative statements (disagreeing with a negatively phrased statement is a cognitively complex task).
- Always balance the number of positive (e.g. agree, agree a lot) and negative response options (e.g. disagree, disagree a lot).
- It can put children at ease if you preface a statement with an introduction that says, "Some children agree with this, and others do not. What do you think?"
- Always separate out the scale midpoint (e.g. partly agree, partly disagree) from the "don't know" response, and ensure the latter is always recorded.
- For attitudinal questions, think carefully if you wish children to answer on behalf of children in general or themselves in particular.
- In case of sensitive questions, it might be a tricky to use age-relevant phrasing (i.e., instead of "pornography", use "inappropriate content"). Make sure you use words that represent already existing cultural practices (in this case, pornography), that are already included in children's vocabulary, without, however, leading the question and without implying negative or positive evaluation ("inappropriate content" may suggest to children that viewing pornography is inappropriate for them per se, and thus lead them to respond accordingly).
- Reverse the direction of some questions to reduce response bias: for example, if saying "yes" to some questions means you like the internet and saying "yes" to others means you don't like it, you could minimize the effect of children's tendency to agree with statements presented to them.
- Use age-relevant terms as well as terms relevant to children's everyday life and use of media.
- If item lists are provided as response options (e.g. lists of media used, lists of activities), then always end with an "other" option. If you have the resources to hand code these, ask the child to specify what the "other" is.

Questions to consider

Is this a topic that can be well addressed using a survey? Do you know the kinds of answers that children are likely to provide? Have you piloted the survey and do you know how long it takes? For young children, will there be someone present to help them or to answer their questions? Should this topic instead be addressed using qualitative methods? If you ask open-ended questions, are you sure you have the resources to code their responses?

Pitfalls to avoid

The pitfalls are implicit in the above advice, and in essence are the same for children as for adults. If a survey questionnaire is too complex or confusing, uses difficult words, has inappropriate response options, doesn't provide a "don't know", "other", or "I don't want to say" response option where needed, asks leading questions etc., you may not know this from the survey administration until you come to analyse the answers. A "don't know", "other", or "I don't want to say" response option may increase the data quality, as it will reduce the amount of default (or misleading) selections. If the survey is administered as a pen-and-paper survey, children sometimes write rude answers if they don't like or don't understand the questions! Large amounts of missing data also provide a clue that you've got something wrong.

Examples of good attitudinal questions

From UK Children Go Online questions to low or non-users included: 'How much do you agree or disagree that … I'm missing out by not using the internet and email (more); I can find out all I need from books; The internet helps people get ahead in life; I sometimes feel left out when my friends talk about the internet; The internet makes it easier to keep in touch with people; I would like to use the internet more in the future.' Response options: Agree a lot/Agree a little/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree a little/Disagree a lot/Don't know.

From the Parents & Teens 2004 Survey, 'Do you agree or disagree or don't know (Note: no scale midpoint provided) that … If a child isn't using the internet by the time they start school, they will fall behind their peers; Most teens are not careful enough about the information they give out about themselves online; Teens who use the internet to stay in touch with their friends have better social lives than teens who don't use the internet to do this; Teens waste a lot of time online, when they could be doing more important things; The internet helps teens do better in school; Too many teens today use the internet to cheat on their schoolwork; Most teens do things online that they wouldn't want their parents to know about.'

The 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Survey (Finkelhor, 2006) asked a simple question: 'How important is the internet in your life, on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being extremely important?' (Range 1–5) Don't know/not sure/Refused/Not ascertainable/Not applicable. (Sonia Livingstone and Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)

A researcher's experience

In my 'mobile phone' questionnaire, I realized that it is not a good idea to have too many sub-questions under the same question as this confuses respondents. For example, a question about 'use of camera on the mobile' was subdivided to no less than 14 subsequent questions which sometimes confused the respondents. The lesson to be learned is to have fewer questions, and not too many sub-questions. Each sub-question has to be worded so as not to leave any space for misinterpretations or variable answers. (Liza Tsaliki, Greece)

References and further resources

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FAQ 19: How should I refer to children's media activities?

What's the issue?

To achieve a high level of validity in research with children regarding their online activities requires mutual understanding and shared definitions of the terms used in the questions.

Common practice

Before beginning any research, it is vital to discover both the range of media technologies and activities in which children engage, and also what they call them. This form of pilot research is often done using qualitative methods such as a limited number of interviews or focus groups. When asking questions to children, the terms that will be used have to be carefully explained. The same holds for the children's understanding of the words they use. This issue is especially important with very young children. For example, when asking "Have you ever met in real life with strangers that you first met on the net?", the term "stranger" has to be explained in order to ensure children's valid response.

Pitfalls to avoid

- Children may misunderstand or misinterpret research questions even if these questions contain everyday language, like "stranger" or "new media". This may lead to invalid results

- Surveys that do not provide options like "other" or interviews that do not include questions like "what are you thinking of" make it difficult to follow up on children's own preferred terms.

Examples of studies looking at children's media activities

In the SAFT Children's Survey (Norway, 2005/06), the questionnaire included a wide range of activities for which children might use the internet, phrasing these in everyday language, using non-overlapping terms, including an 'other' option (some researchers invited respondents to write in what this was), and permitting multiple response options as needed:

'What kind of things do you do on the internet?' MORE THAN ONE ANSWER

Response options: Chatting in chat rooms/Using instant messaging/Sending and receiving email/Doing homework/Getting information other than for schoolwork/Playing games on the internet/Surfing for fun/shopping or making a purchase/Downloading music/Making personal website/blogging/publishing pictures or information/Downloading software/Watching pornography/Visiting fan sites/Visiting sites for hobbies (knitting, cats, model airplanes, etc.)/Visiting news sites (newspapers, online news services, etc.)/Other things/Do not know.

For further information, see SAFT (Safety Awareness Facts and Tools) Project, 2006 Parent and Children Survey. 2004–06: *Norwegian action plan for children, youth and the internet* and the European Commission Safer Internet Action Plan: Norwegian Media Authority.

The Pew Research Center's Parents, Kids and the Internet 2001 Survey tries to avoid social desirability biases by saying, 'Now I have a few questions about the kinds of things YOU do when you go online. Not everyone has done these things. Please just tell me whether you ever do each one, or not.'

The Ofcom Media Literacy Survey has a different list of response options, and also seeks to discover children's main activities, asking: 'Thinking about what you do when you use the internet, which of these do you use the internet for?' READ OUT – MULTICODE OK. 'And which would you say are your main uses?' CODE UP TO THREE RESPONSES.

Response options: Emails/Chat rooms/Instant messaging (MSN Messenger, AOL Messenger, etc.)/Reading or writing web-logs/Blogging/creating/updating websites/Schoolwork/homework/Sports news/Finding out things for someone else/Celebrity/showbiz news/Playing games/eBay/QXL/auction sites/Downloading music/Looking at national or international news/Listening to radio/TV programme websites/Other (WRITE IN).

In the US, the 2005 national survey conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (Finkelhor, 2006) put these activities in the context of the last year, stating: 'Most of these questions ask about things that happened in the past year. First, I have some questions about what you do when you use the internet. In the past year, have you used the internet to' (Read list) [1 = Yes, 2 = No, 97 = Don't know/not sure, 98 = Refused/not ascertainable, 99 = Not applicable]: Go to websites/Use email/Use instant messages/Go to chat rooms/Play games/For school assignments/To download music, pictures, or videos from file-sharing programmes like Kazaa or Bear Share/To keep an online journal or blog/To use an online dating or romance site. (Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)

A researcher's experience

In the representative cross-national SAFT survey, we had over 100 research questions for the children to answer in a self-completion questionnaire form. Filters were included in the questionnaire, one of which was to single out those who used chat services in order to ask them more in-depth questions regarding uses and experiences. Children who did not answer 'yes' to the question 'Have you ever chatted on the internet?' were asked to skip the following 12 questions. When analysing the results it became clear that the numbers for children claiming to use chat services were substantially lower than expected based on other user reports and traffic data from the industry. Why? Many children did not label their use of MSN Messenger – the most popular tool for peer-to-peer communication in 2006 – as 'chat', but simply as 'messenger', making them not answer the follow-up questions regarding communication online. It is not just semantics. (Elisabeth Staksrud, Norway)

References and further resources

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FAQ 20: How do you adjust data collection methods for different age groups?

What's the issue?

It is important to separate what you want to ask children from how you ask it. How you ask it depends on how old they are – on their competence to understand what you are asking, and to express themselves in their reply.

If children think a question is too old for them, they will still try to give an answer, but the answer may be meaningless. If they think a question is too young for them, they will become bored, or may give a silly answer deliberately.

This issue is important in ensuring your data are reliable and valid. But it is also important to ensure that child participants are treated with respect.

Common practice

- Researchers working with children generally conduct a pilot study, putting their questions to the age group they wish to research. Only with careful piloting of questions (for a survey or interview) can you be sure that the children understand your question and can express their answer.
- If qualitative methods are used, the language and approach can be adjusted in the research situation, provided the researcher is experienced in working with children.
- For surveys, younger children will require a simpler version of the questions and a shorter questionnaire – 20 minutes is a long time to sit still for a 7-year-old. Most researchers don't ask questions about time use to children younger than about 9.
- Many researchers use the age categories used by schools as a guide to maturity (elementary children, primary children, secondary/high school, etc.) as these categories inform social norms of in/dependence.
- Straightforward questioning may be supplemented with prompts and stimulus material (Bragg, 2007). Some examples include:
  - Controversial or representative statements to initiate reactions; for example, McCallum *et al.* (2000) used four "statements cards" about learning as prompts with children aged 6 and 11.
  - Focus groups may use colour cards to access feelings where (Bragg, 2007) different colours evoke different emotions, and can be interesting as a way to talk about positive and negative aspects of, for instance, a project (de Bono, 2000).
  - Timelines – children draw or get a timeline and mark on it the ups and downs of a project, a period of time, their own lives, etc. These could also take the form of "confidence lines" that show how a person's confidence has changed over the course of a project, or what they can do afterwards that they could not do before (Bragg, 2007).
  - Ranking exercises: children may be given a set of cards or photographs of activities or issues to rank in order of importance (Bragg, 2007).

Pitfalls to avoid

- It is tempting to treat children of different ages in the same group – for example, conducting a focus group with children aged 7–10. But this is too big a group – the younger children will be intimidated and the older ones may feel insulted.
- The cognitive capacity of younger and older children must be considered carefully – don't ask younger children questions containing double negatives (e.g. "Do you agree or disagree that it is a problem that some children can't access the internet?"); ethically, it is important not to introduce "adult" ideas (e.g. of images of sexual violence) to children who have not already experienced these in their daily lives.

- Remember that, while teenagers will probably understand your questions easily, they are very sensitive to the presence of peers – it may be better to interview them alone.

Examples of studies where data collection was adjusted for different age groups

In my research, prior meetings with teachers indicated that questionnaires for the younger children should be very simplified and not include open questions, since at this stage they were able to read but still struggled with their writing skills. For the questionnaires for the younger children, each page included one question visually aided by drawings. Open questions included on the 4th year questionnaires were excluded from the 1st years'. In the case of 1st year children, the teacher explained the task and read the questions out loud, waiting for everyone to answer. It was difficult to keep them from shouting their answers and making side comments, but overall they seemed to be concerned that their answers were not copied – they warned each other not to do that. For group interviews, the children, particularly the younger ones, were very enthusiastic and keen to talk about cartoons, but some 4th-grade groups were slightly reluctant and made clear attempts to distance themselves from a genre they said was for younger children – stressing that they did not see cartoons, and that they watched other programmes such as sports or soap operas; or even refusing to comment at all on the clips shown, like the afternoon group of girls. From these reactions it seemed that to ask them to expose themselves in front of an adult and their peers by displaying any knowledge of, and thus admitting watching, the genre raised questions of status. Thus, I opted to use different task-oriented research techniques that would allow different ways of contributing. By asking the children to create and criticize a cartoon, the emphasis was not on their viewing habits but on their creative competencies. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

While for young children, we asked simple questions about the importance of the internet in their lives (what do you like or not like about it? would you miss it?), older children should not be underestimated. In focus groups with 15- to 19-year-olds, the UK Children Go Online project asked questions such as, 'Now that the internet is here and part of your life, what difference would it make if you no longer had access yourself?', 'What difference would it make if the internet disappeared altogether? Would things be better or worse?', 'Do you think we pay too much attention to computers in our society? Do we overrate the internet and how it can change things?', 'What about those left out, those people who don't have internet access? Why might they not have or not want to have internet access?, Do you think they're missing out on something? What consequences does it have for them?' (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

A researcher's experience

A common mistake in research where children are involved is to take something that is designed for adults and to use it, sometimes in a modified way, sometimes unchanged, to research children. An example of how this can lead to serious errors comes from the long-term research project Children and Television in Iceland. To measure television viewing, the research used a diary listing the programmes of the three biggest television stations in Iceland from Monday to Sunday in the week before the survey. Respondents could indicate whether they had watched a particular programme. Beforehand, the main concern for the researchers was whether the children would have difficulties in remembering what they had watched and understand the format of the diary. As it turned out, though, this set-up proved itself very well. An unexpected problem turned up, however. The diary was modelled on a diary intended for adults, and so the children's programme (starting at 09.00 on the two biggest channels) on Saturday and Sunday mornings was simply omitted and the diary started at 12.00 noon. Despite countless preparatory meetings where at least a dozen individuals looked at the diary and a small pilot study with young children, this problem was not discovered until after the data had been collected. (Kjartan, Iceland)

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FAQ 21: Who should interview children – what difference does it make?

What's the issue?

The asymmetry in power between adults and children can create distortions when adults interview children. Children may become anxious, try too hard to please, their privacy may be easily invaded, and so forth. The risk is that the researcher will obtain misleading information containing social desirability biases.

Common practice

- One strategy is to assign the child interviewee an "expert role" – for example, let them know that they are the expert on their own media use, and explain that you would like to understand better what the child already knows.
- Another strategy is to pay careful attention to the dynamics of the situation, including such practicalities as making sure you sit at the same height as the child.
- Some researchers train one child to interview others, perhaps asking an older child to talk to younger children while the researcher listens in.
- If the researcher is visiting the home, parents and children may feel more comfortable if the researcher is female.

Pitfalls to avoid

- Try to let the child, not the adult interviewer, set the tone and pace of the interaction.
- Don't stand over a child.
- Try not to surprise them but explain what is coming next.
- Dress informally, not formally.
- Don't underestimate the child's awareness of the power relations in an interview.
- Try to use the child's language, glossary, and expressions.

A researcher's experience

> Even though one researcher can be sufficient in research with adolescents, two researchers may occasionally be needed with younger children. In a normal usability lab situation, the researcher takes both the roles of observer and facilitator. Zaman (2005) explains that, because of the need to make younger children feel comfortable during the usability tests, speaking through an intercom system (from the observing room) is too impersonal for children who are sitting alone in the living room (the testing room). In this special case, to prevent children from feeling left to their own devices, a second researcher, who sits next to them and guides them through the test, is needed. The quality of the information gained by the user's answers can thus be improved. (Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

> In the TIRO research project the qualitative studies were realized by a male researcher (in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) and a female researcher (in the French-speaking part of Belgium). Both researchers were in their early twenties and this definitely helped to create a confident and open atmosphere in which the teenagers were willing to share their practices. Although the parents also were ready to tell about their own experiences, it is clear that they had less confidence in the young researchers, asking them questions about their parenthood without being themselves (young) parents. Furthermore, on several occasions, the male researcher encountered parents who scrutinized him when he interviewed their teenage daughter or who only hesitantly gave permission to let their daughter show the researcher her bedroom (in order to get rich descriptions of their private life world and how ICT is part of it). (Joke Bauwens, Belgium)

References and further resources

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FAQ 22: How do I ask children questions about time use?

What's the issue?

Estimating the time spent on an activity is notoriously difficult, even for adults, because (a) people do not usually time their routine activities; (b) media activities are not discrete but overlap with others; and (c) measures rely on memory, a problem compounded by the request not just to report on time spent yesterday but to report on "average" time spent.

Common practice

Every strategy has been tried, at one time or another – asking people about the proportion of their evening spent on television, or the amount of time spent online yesterday, or how long they spend reading the newspaper on a typical day, etc.

One rule of thumb is to provide a reference period when asking about time use, asking, for example: "How often in the last week [or month]", or "Thinking of your average school day, how many hours per day do you use the internet?"

Care is also needed with the response options. You could offer approximate ranges (e.g. more than once a day, almost every day, a few times a week, about once a week, two or three times a month, about once a month, and less than once a month) or vague quantifiers (e.g. often, sometimes, rarely, never), or exact hours (less than one hour per day, 1–2 hours, 2–3 hours, etc.). Beware that one person's "sometimes" could be another person's "often".

Asking about actual hours (or minutes) is often preferred, but then pilot research is vital to discover the relevant range of response options (time spent texting may be measured in minutes; if many children spend 4–6 hours per day online, then a scale with an upper limit of 4+ hours will lack sensitivity).

However, a comparison of multiple methods (using the same sample; see Livingstone & Bovill, 1999) found that children under-report time using a diary method (ticking activities for each hour of the day) compared with general survey answers (the same study found that parents and their 9- to 17-year-old children made similar time estimates of the child's media use, though parental responses were a little lower). Van der Voort and Vooijs (1990) found the same under-reporting for diary studies, and so recommend the use of direct time estimates.

Even if single survey questions have proven to give very accurate results for measuring time use, diary methods give more detailed information on the use itself and the time spent on individual activities. Diary methods, however, are quite demanding for young people, and can therefore lead to higher non-response.

Pitfalls to avoid

- Take care in reporting findings not to create a misleading impression of exactness in responses. While it may be reasonably reliable to compare responses to the same question across subgroups (e.g. boys spend longer online than girls), the absolute values may be less reliable (the claim that children spend 2.34 hours online per day may have been calculated from wide response options, e.g. less than two hours, 2–4 hours, more than 4 hours per day).

- Care is needed in relating findings to the pertinent sample: if only 50% of children surveyed actually use the internet, the average time spent online per day may be 1 hour for "internet users" but only 30 minutes for "all children". A similar problem applies for activities that are not daily: if the child spends one hour every other day.

- Days of the week differ: if you interview children on a Monday, then "yesterday" was a weekend, reflecting different media use from interviews done on a Tuesday. Some researchers therefore avoid Mondays. Others ask about Monday to Thursday as "typical days" and may, separately, ask about the weekend. For the internet, you may need to distinguish "hours spent in your leisure time" or "hours after school" from time spent during school (or work) time. Be sure that your reporting of time use relates directly to the question asked (e.g. children go online on average several times a week, or on a day when they use the internet, children go online for around 2 hours per day).

- Note that maximizing accuracy in time use measurements can occupy many questions in a survey, so determine in advance how the measure will be used and whether subtle discriminations are required.

Examples of ways to measure time use

The UK Children Go Online survey asked: 'Overall, how often do you use the internet THESE DAYS (anywhere)?' Responses: Several times per day/About once a day/A couple of times a week/About once a week/A couple of times a month/About once a month/Less often/Never/Don't know. Those who used the internet at least once each week were then asked: 'On a typical school/college or work day, how much of your leisure time do you spend ... playing computer/electronic games?' None/About 10 minutes or less/About half an hour/About 1 hour/About 1–2 hours/About 2–3 hours/About 3–4 hours/About 4–5 hours/About 5 hours or more/Don't know. This was repeated for 'at the weekend, or in the holidays'. An average figure was then calculated as (weekday x 5 + weekend x 2)/7.

Ofcom's Media Literacy Survey estimated time use in several steps:

1. ASK IF USE INTERNET AT HOME: Please think about the time you spend using the internet at home. How many hours would you say you spend using the internet at home on a typical school day? And how many hours would you say you spend using the internet at home on a day at the weekend?

2. ASK IF USE INTERNET AT SCHOOL: Please think about the time you spend using the internet at school. How many hours would you say you spend using the internet at school on a typical school day?

3. ASK IF USE INTERNET ELSEWHERE: Please think about the time you spend using the internet elsewhere (so not at home and not at school) in one week. How many hours would you say you spend using the internet elsewhere on a typical school day? And how many hours would you say you spend using the internet elsewhere on a day at the weekend?

The interviewer then calculated total weekly hours by adding the answers above using the formula: 5 x typical school day plus 2 x day at the weekend.

Taking a simpler approach, the Pew Research Center's Parents, Kids and the Internet 2001 Survey asked, 'How often do you go online, use email, or instant messaging – every day, a couple times a week, about once a week, or less often?' Their 2004 Teen Survey asked 'Overall, how often do you go online – several times a day, about once a day, 3–5 days a week, 1–2 days a week, every few weeks, or less often?'

An equally simple approach, focused on hours rather than days, was taken by the 2005 national survey conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (Finkelhor, 2006): 'How many hours are you online on a usual day when you use the internet?' 1 hour or less 1/More than 1–2 hours/More than 2–3 hours/More than 3–4 hours/More than 4–5 hours/More than 5–6 hours/More than 6–7 hours/More than 7–8 hours/More than 8–9 hours/More than 9–10 hours/More than 10 hours/Don't know/not sure/Refused/Not ascertainable/not applicable.

Last, the Kaiser Family Foundation Kids Media @ The New Millennium (1999) approached the problem thus: 'Thinking only about yesterday/this past Friday/this past Saturday, about how much time did you spend using the computer for the following activities?' Visiting chat rooms/Looking at websites/Email. Response options (for each of these three activities) were: None/5 minutes/15 minutes/30 minutes/45 minutes/1 hour/1 1⁄2 hours/More than 1 1⁄2 hours (WRITE IN ANSWER). (Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)

In Sweden in the 1970s the Audience and Programme Research Department at the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation performed special methodological studies about at which age time-specific questions about television viewing (and other media, etc.) were possible to put to children (e.g. 'Did you watch television "yesterday"'?), as well as questions about 'how long' the child had spent on a certain media activity. The studies clearly showed that most children under 9 could not answer such questions properly (due to child development generally), while almost all children from age 9 onwards could.

References and further resources

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FAQ 23: What's the best way of asking children sensitive questions?

What's the issue?

With any research method, you have to work on gaining children's trust in order to ask about sensitive issues, such as unpleasant chat experiences, dangerous situations, bullying, or sexual harassment. This is important both to ensure valid answers and to meet ethical requirements. Hence, judging whether (or how) certain questions can be asked of children at a certain age is crucial.

Common practice

- You should know as much as possible about the child's "sensitive issues" before the interview (disability, abuse, neglect, trauma, nicknames, etc.).
- The more sensitive the issue, the more important it is for you to gain the trust of the children informants, in order for them to open up and talk about their experiences.
- The research questions should not use emotive language, and the terms used should be as close as possible to the everyday terms children use.
- The range of response options provided, if a closed-ended question, is vital, as the responses suggest to the child what kind of answers you are expecting, and the kinds of answers that other children might give.
- Slow down the rate of speech and use short sentences.
- Ask the child to repeat back if needed to ensure clarity of the information given.

Questions to consider

Did the child give consent to these questions? Does the child realize he/she can refuse to answer any particular question? Can anyone overhear the child's answers? Does the child understand that his/her answers will be kept anonymous? Are you asking about something that is part of, or new to, the child's experience? (If unsure, open-ended piloting is necessary first.) Do you really need to ask this question?

Pitfalls to avoid

Be careful not to put problematic ideas into children's minds. One qualitative study asked primary school children whether they ever used the internet for hacking, downloading music or movies, disabling filters on the home computer, or using someone else's email without their permission. Balancing these twin pitfalls is difficult – you must neither assume that children are only victims and never perpetrators of online risks, nor give them ideas for bad behaviour that they did not have before.

Be careful with linguistic and cultural differences. Be prepared for cultural values, practices, or beliefs.

Examples of survey questions about online risk

From UK Children Go Online, questions about risky disclosure of personal information were phrased as follows: 'While on the internet what information have you ever given to another person that you have not met face-to-face?' SELECT ALL THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE GIVEN

Response options: Personal email address/Full name/Age and date of birth/Phone number/Your interests or hobbies/A photograph of you/Parent's name/School/I have never given out information about myself/I don't want to answer/Don't know.

From the Pew Research Center's Parents, Kids and the Internet Survey 2001, questions about children's active role in risky activities: 'Here are some other things some people do online. What about you?' 'Have you ever...' (READ; ROTATE)? (a) Had someone give you fake information about themselves in an email or instant message; (b) Used email or instant message to talk to someone you had never met before; (c) Given your password to a friend or someone you know; (d) Pretended to be a different person when you were emailing or instant messaging someone; (e) Sent a prank email or an email 'bomb'.

From SAFT (Children Norway, 2005/06), question about bullying and distress: 'In the past 6 months, have you ever been harassed, upset, bothered, threatened, or embarrassed by anyone chatting online?' Yes/No/Don't know.

From the Pew Research Center's Parents & Teens 2006 Survey (12–17 years old): 'Have you, personally, ever experienced any of the following things online? You can just tell me yes or no.'

> (a) Someone spreading a rumour about you online; (b) Someone posting an embarrassing picture of you online without your permission; (c) Someone sending you a threatening or aggressive email, instant message or text message; (d) Someone taking a private email, instant message or text message you sent them and forwarding it to someone else or posting it where others could see it.

From UK Children Go Online, questions about children's concerns: 'Which of these things, if any, do you worry about when you use the internet?' SHOW LIST. PROBE: WHICH OTHERS?

> Response options: Being contacted by dangerous people/People finding things out about you that are personal or private/Seeing things that might bother or upset you/Spending too much time on the internet/Possibility of getting a computer virus/Don't know/None of these.

From the 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children survey (Finkelhor, 2006), questions about sexual risks:

> 'Now I have some questions about things that happen to some young people on the internet. In the past year, did you ever feel worried or threatened because someone was bothering or harassing you online?' Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable.

> 'In the past year, did anyone ever use the internet to threaten or embarrass you by posting or sending messages about you for other people to see?' (response options as above)

> 'In the past year when you were doing an online search or surfing the web, did you ever find yourself in a website that showed pictures of naked people or of people having sex when you did not want to be in that kind of site?'

> 'In the past year, how many times have you made rude or nasty comments to someone on the internet? Would you say...' Never/1 time/2 times/3–5 times/6 or more times/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable.

This survey included several follow-up questions. For example: 'You mentioned more than one (other) thing happening to you. Thinking only of the things that happened in the past year, which of these situations bothered you the most?' And: 'Why do you think this person was bothering or harassing you?' (write in below).

It asked several questions about meeting strangers online, as follows: 'I have some more questions about being on the internet with people you don't know in person. In the past year, have you met someone on the internet who you have chatted with or exchanged email or instant messages with more than once?'

> 'Sometimes when people get to know each other online, they want to meet in person. Did this person (any of these people) want to meet you in person?' (I mean people who were [R's age + 5] or older.)

> 'Did you actually meet this person (any of these people) face to face?' (I mean people who were [R's age + 5] or older.)

> 'In the past year, have you had a romantic online relationship with someone you met on the internet? I mean someone who felt like a boyfriend or girlfriend.' (Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)

References and further resources

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FAQ 24: What's the best way to ask about parental mediation?

What's the issue?

Various types of mediation activity are practised by many parents. Developed originally for parental mediation of television, these are now being extended to parental mediation of the internet, games, and online technologies. Since parental activities in the home are subtle and complex, it can be difficult to ask about them in surveys or interviews.

Common practice

A consensus has developed that three main kinds of mediation are practised:

- restrictive (setting rules about time, location, or content, limiting time or other activities, banning certain activities or websites)
- active (discussing media content, guiding choices, instructing interpretation, critiquing media content, making evaluative comments)
- co-use (co-viewing, sharing the activity, being present but not commenting).

These are all social forms of mediation. Additionally, for the internet, you could ask about the use of filtering, monitoring, or other technical forms of mediation.

Pitfalls to avoid

- In designing a survey or interview schedule, you cannot ask about just one type of parental mediation (e.g. "Do you have rules for your child?"). Answers to these different types of mediation are not generally highly correlated; indeed, subtypes emerge from factor analyses conducted on answers to multiple separate items in a survey.
- It is also clear from research that children and parents answer these questions differently – generally, parents claim more mediation and children claim less mediation. Ideally, both parents and children should be interviewed.
- A rule of thumb would be to take parent and child estimates as specifying the likely upper and lower bounds of parental mediation. If only parents, or only children, are asked, the interpretation of the data must recognize that the source questioned is likely to under- or over-estimate actual practice.

Examples of studies asking about parental mediation

The SAFT and the UK Children Go Online surveys asked parents and children the same questions. For example, to ask about active and co-use forms of mediation, the questions to parents (with equivalent questions to children) were:

Do you (or your spouse/partner) do any of these things nowadays? (tick all that apply):

Make sure you stay in the same room or nearby when your child is online

Sit with your child and go online together

Help your child when he/she is on the internet

Ask/talk to your child about what he/she is doing or did on the internet

Keep an eye on what's on the screen while your child is online

The Norwegian SAFT Survey (2006) asked children: 'When you go on the internet at home, do any of your parents often, sometimes or never do each of the following?' (Response options: often, sometimes, never, don't know):

When I am on the internet at home, my parents sit with me while I surf

When I am on the internet at home, my parents check in on me

When I am on the internet at home, my parents use filters to block sites they do not want me to go to

When I am on the internet at home, my parents check to see which sites I have visited

It isn't easy to ask about parental control tools, as neither parents nor children may be clear about what exactly these are. The 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Survey (Finkelhor, 2006) asked children this way: 'Is there any software on this computer that blocks pop-up ads or SPAM email?' Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable. Also: 'Is there any software on this computer that filters, blocks, or monitors how you use the internet (besides software that blocks pop-ups or SPAM)?' Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable.

Their questions to parents were more explicit: 'At any time in the past year, has there been software on the computer your child uses at home that filters, blocks, or monitors what your child does or sees online?' Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable. And: 'I have some questions about what types of blocking, filtering, or monitoring software have been on the computer your child uses at home, including software you may have stopped using. In the past 12 months, has there been software that...' (READ) [1 = Yes, 2 = No, 97 = Don't know/not sure, 98 = Not ascertainable/refused, 99 = Not applicable]

Blocks SPAM email?

Blocks pop-up ads?

Filters sexually explicit images or websites?

Blocks or controls your child's use of chat rooms, email, newsgroups, or instant messaging?

Monitors your child's online activities?

Limits the amount of time your child can spend online?

Blocks personal information from being posted or emailed?

Uses a browser or search engine just for children?

In qualitative work, parental mediation is easier to ask about, because you can follow up to be sure you know just what children mean. The Eurobarometer qualitative study asked, in focus groups, 'Can you use the internet as you wish and as often as you wish, or do you have any limits, rules or recommendations given by your parents – or anything you think your parents would like you to do or not to do although they may not really have told you?' The UK Children Go Online project asked older teenagers, 'Are there rules for using the internet at college? What do they say? What about at home? Do you stick to all of the rules or do you try to get round some of them?' (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

References and further resources

Finkelhor, D. (2006). *The Second Youth Internet Safety Survey (2005-2006).* Crimes Against Children Research Center & National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

FAQ 25: Is it better to research children at home, at school, or elsewhere?

What's the issue?

Children can be more relaxed at home, and interviewing children at home permits direct observation of their interaction with siblings and parents, as well as evidence of the arrangement of media goods around the home, but it may restrict the child's freedom to report on parental rules or values regarding media, and they may feel much freer to discuss this at school. At school, on the other hand, the gaze of teachers and peers is considerable, constituting another kind of social pressure. A child may be shy at school but open up to the researcher at home. Children surveyed in the classroom may worry that teachers will see their answers but be confident that parents will not. Research in school settings involves other difficulties such as obtaining consent from the individuals who will be asked to provide data in the study, the school system itself, which rarely allows researchers to take all student participants and randomly assign them to conditions, access may be difficult to obtain and further complications may hinder the research process as it is ideally conceived (Mertens, 1998).

Common practice

As a rule of thumb, children should be interviewed in settings where they feel comfortable and where they feel at enough ease to open up.

Questions to consider

Which is the location where children will feel most relaxed? Are the questions you'll ask sensitive or embarrassing? Are the answers fairly factual or could they be influenced by the presence of peers? How long do you need for the research? Will you also interview either teachers or parents? What are the issues involved in gaining permission to work with children in schools, and/or at home, in your country? Where can you obtain a quiet room for recording a conversation? What are the implications for interviewers' (or interviewees') travel time and expenses at one site over another? Care is particularly required if approaching children outside either home or school; indeed, this may be excluded altogether for ethical reasons.

Pitfalls to avoid

Avoid interviewing children in a setting (such as school) where they feel that they should try to be clever and provide the "right answers". Avoid interviewing or observing children in a place which, though they may be relaxed there, is inappropriate for the questions to be asked or the activities to be observed by the researcher.

Examples of good practice

Non-formal environments (such as internet cafés) are, in my opinion, the most appropriate places to interview children. During my investigation, I had the chance to interview them in a park, during their summer holidays. However, this is a hard period not only to find children to be interviewed, but also to get them to concentrate. The presence of adults can also constrain the interview. When I interviewed children, some of them asked if the conversation was only with me or if there would be any other adult. I also noticed that they were more open to tell me – a stranger who wouldn't come back – some confidences, than their own teachers. (Cátia Candeias, Portugal)

In the UK Children Go Online Survey, conducted in the home face-to-face, the section on sensitive questions (about seeing pornography, race hate, violence, etc.) was conducted using a self-completion questionnaire on the computer. Neither the interviewer nor the parent could see the screen. Specific instructions were:

For the next few questions I'd like you to use the laptop yourself as you may find that you'd like to answer some questions by yourself. You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to. To show you how to use the computer, I'll do a few practice questions with you. If at any time you have any problems, just ask me.

In both the UK Children Go Online Survey, and in Ofcom's Media Literacy Survey, parents were gently requested not to be present for the entire interview. The interviewer also recorded whether the parent complied, thus permitting responses to be filtered according to parental presence after, if desired. The questionnaire instructions thus stated:

SAY TO PARENT – Thank you very much for answering those questions. I'd now like to ask (CHILD TO BE INTERVIEWED) some questions on their own if that's OK?

WAS THE CHILD TO BE INTERVIEWED PRESENT DURING THIS INTERVIEW WITH THEIR PARENT? SINGLE CODE

Yes, and child conferred with parent as the interview was taking place

Yes, but they did not comment during the interview

No, they were not present

INTERVIEWER – OK FOR PARENT TO STAY, BUT WOULD PREFER TO INTERVIEW CHILD ALONE, IN CASE PARENT BEING THERE ALTERS THE CHILD'S RESPONSES. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

Research for my PhD dissertation was carried out in school. All participants were first surveyed by the researcher in their classrooms during school time. During the administration of the survey most teachers left the room. However, when they did not we asked them not to interfere with the survey administration and explained to them that this responded to the need to assure the reliability of children's responses as, in some cases, the teacher's presence might trigger socially or academically desirable responses from students. In all cases teachers were understanding and willing to cooperate. For the second phase of our data collection we requested each school to provide a place where no teachers or other school authorities were present so as to favour the creation of a more relaxing atmosphere for the interviews. Finally, by means of the establishment of rapport and an open and relaxed attitude with the adolescents interviewed, many of the inconveniences associated with school settings were certainly diminished and, consequently, a proper interview environment could be created. (Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

Where users' tests are carried out and (usability) laboratories are employed, it is not always easy to provide a 'natural' atmosphere. However, by means of arranging labs as a more familiar environment and by trying to create an appropriate level of rapport with the subjects being tested, it is possible to minimize the tension and bias associated with being the subject of an 'experiment'. At the Centre of Usability Research (CUO) at the Catholic University of Leuven much research is carried out by means of a usability lab. However, the stationary usability lab employed is arranged as a living room (with armchairs, a side table, a television set, a desk, etc.) so that test-users may experience new applications in a situation that is close to a real life experience. Moreover, the usability lab at the CUO is arranged in a cosy, homelike manner so that it gives subjects the impression that they are not in a lab or in a workplace, but rather in someone's living room. (Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

In our research, questionnaires were given to the teachers. I had a prior conversation to explain that these were not meant to assess the children's knowledge about television but to perceive their opinion about children's programming. Therefore, there was no 'correct' answer, and the children should not be pressured to give any answer. The teachers told the children that only their opinion mattered so they should not make comments or ask their colleagues' views. Given that the task took place in an educational context, I took into consideration the roles that both children and teachers are expected to play, and the fact that the tasks normally performed are 'assessment'-driven. Still, the children did not seem to have considered this as an assessment exercise. They were quite at ease and enjoying the exercise; they laughed and showed eagerness to talk about the programmes. The only concern was to get the spelling of the cartoon titles right. The younger children might have been a bit uncomfortable with the researcher's presence in the class, also tending to look for confirmation on the correctness of certain answers. The older children were very comfortable with my presence from the moment we were

introduced; they were curious about the nature of the task and asked questions about its purpose. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

References and further resources

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FAQ 26: How can I measure children's socio-economic background?

What's the issue?

The socio-economic and socio-ecological backgrounds of children and their families are very complex: they are constituted by an interaction of the different aspects and settings of families' daily lives (e.g. neighbourhood, family styles such as single-parent families, interrelation between family members, family income, and so on) (Paus-Hasebrink & Bichler 2008).

It is clear that children's access to, and use of, the internet and online technologies differs according to their socio-economic status (SES). Yet this is difficult to measure and, as so often, varies by country, academic discipline, and research method (especially whether interviewing parents or children). Since inequalities are crucial to internet research, it is important that researchers undertake this task and do not omit measuring SES in their research design.

Common practice

Several approaches are possible:

- Sample children according to schools. It is generally possible to identify schools in poor, average, and well-off neighbourhoods, on the basis of official statistics. It is accepted practice to assume that children from these schools will differ systematically by SES (although the same assumption should not be made for individual children).

- Ask children for information that will indicate, approximately, their SES. Teenagers may be expected to know how much education their parents received (below high school, finished high school, further education, university); younger children may know if they went to university or not, and this provides a fair proxy for SES.

- Use proxy measures. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Survey developed two measures to construct the SES index for their 2003 survey, namely: "About how many books/cars are there in your parents' or caretakers' home?" Torney-Purta *et al.* (2001) show that these questions provide reasonable proxies for educational and economic resources, respectively, and the answers are sufficient to subdivide children by SES, even though the measures are, of course, inexact.

- Ask parents directly for information that will indicate SES. In some countries, terminal age of education is asked, or you could ask household income (by income brackets centred on the national average income and with more categories below the average than above). Or you could ask questions about occupation, etc. according to a standard system of classification. This means either interviewing the parents, or sending a questionnaire to parents when interviewing their child (most efficiently, this could accompany the parental consent form, which must in any case be returned signed to the researcher).

Pitfalls to avoid

Don't ask children what their parents do for a living – first, you must hand code the answers, which is very time-consuming; second, the answers will be ambiguous (does an "engineer" service the central heating or design bridges?, what does "works in an office" mean?); third, many children do not know the answer. These questions may also result in social desirability biases, as children may feel uncomfortable saying that their parents have low education or no car.

Examples of good practice

In our research, questions like age and place of birth, and questions regarding SES (such characterization can consider the parents' level of education, type of job, economic sector and position, income, etc.) were complemented with a questionnaire to the parents, which also included one open question regarding their opinion on the provision of public television for children. Both questionnaires were given a code number so that they could be matched for the purpose of characterizing the family unit. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

In the UK, market researchers ask a standard series of questions in order to classify people thus: A – Upper middle class (Higher managerial administrative or professional occupations, top level civil servants), B – Middle class (Intermediate managerial administrative or professional people, senior officers in local government and civil service), C1 – Lower middle class (Supervisory or clerical and junior managerial administrative or professional occupations), C2 – Skilled working class (Skilled manual workers), D – Working class (Semi and unskilled manual workers), E – Those at lowest levels of subsistence (all those entirely dependent on the state: long term, casual workers, those without regular income). SES is strongly correlated with measures of parental occupation, education and income. In the UK Children Go Online research, parents were asked these questions when recruiting children. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

References and further resources

Paus-Hasebrink, I. & Bichler, M. (2008). Analyse des Wandels von Sozialisation. Veränderung von Kindheit in sozial schwächeren bzw. anregungsärmeren Milieus im Kontext des Wandels der Medien (Analysis of the change in socialization. The change of childhood of children from less advantaged homes in the context of the change of media). Endbericht an den Jubliäumsfonds der Österreichischen Nationalbank (*Final report for the Jubilee Fund of the Austrian National Bank*). Unveröffentlichtes Manuskript (Unpublished manuscript).

Torney-Purta, J., Lehmann, R., Oswald, H., & Schulz, W. (2001). *Citizenship and education in twenty-eight countries: Civic knowledge and engagement at age fourteen.* Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

FAQ 27: How do we maximize the reliability and validity of children's answers?

What's the issue?

It is commonly supposed that children are unreliable informants. While designing and conducting research with children takes care, so does research with adults. Parents, for example, are subject to considerable biases (social desirability, third person bias, etc.) when reporting on their children's media use; teachers may also provide a partial and overly positive account of children's activities in class.

Every effort must be made to address the possible circumstances that might undermine children's responses in research (as reiterated throughout this guide). But the notion of children as unreliable must be traded against the benefits of direct questions to children. Who else can report on what a child does with media when alone, or in their bedroom, or how they feel about violent content, or what pressure they feel from their friends? A useful principle, therefore, is to assume that each child is capable of providing valid and insightful information, provided that s/he is approached appropriately and that the data are interpreted carefully.

Common practice

In qualitative interviews, you have the chance to address inconsistencies and contradictions in what children might say. Thus you should check for misunderstandings, verify interpretations, and explore contradictions in what children say, to check if this indicates experienced ambiguities and ambivalences.

In surveys, piloting the questionnaire is vital to ensure reliability, as is taking care to understand the reasons for lots of missing values on a question, or comments scribbled or muttered during the questionnaire, or peculiar results that suggest a misunderstanding has arisen.

There are four main problems survey respondents face: s/he doesn't understand the question, s/he doesn't know the answer, s/he cannot recall it, and s/he doesn't want to report the answer. Therefore, good research practice should anticipate and seek to eliminate these problems to increase validity:

- Understanding the question: if the question includes difficult or complex terminology and is not well understood, then simplify complex terms and give definitions of those terms if needed, especially when it comes to very young children. Also, children have to be given the chance to write in more detail about their experiences regarding the questions asked (i.e., the question needs to include a category of answer where the respondent can give his/her own answer in detail).

- Lack of knowledge: if the child doesn't know the answer, either change the questions so as to ask for information that is less detailed and easier to recall, or help the child to estimate the answer or, finally, change or drop the questions.

- Can't recall: to increase recall, have in mind that small events of less impact are more likely to be forgotten than more important events, while recent events can be recalled relatively easily. It may help to use words that provide a clear time frame.

- Unwillingness/social desirability: this is mostly in cases where questions on sensitive personal data are asked. In this case, put a lot of effort into minimizing the sense of judgment and maximizing the importance of accuracy (vocabulary and introduction need particular attention in this respect).

To increase the validity of more subjective questions, you could rephrase questions to ensure that they will mean the same thing to all respondents, or ask multiple questions with different question forms that measure the same subjective state.

Since even trivial changes in the questionnaire design (e.g. wording, number of alternatives/ordinal scales, and position of a question) can make an important difference in how children answer, for subjective questions, answers often cannot be

interpreted directly. In other words, it may not be meaningful to report that 73% of children like the internet, but it would be meaningful to interpret the same answers comparatively (e.g. more boys than girls reported liking the internet, or, parents of users reported more positive attitudes to the internet compared with parents of non-users).

Pitfalls to avoid

Forgetting to pilot all research materials. Failing to use the interview situation to clarify possible interpretations of what children say, or to clarify whether inconsistencies and contradictions are the result of methodological confusions or the genuine ambiguities and ambivalences in their lifeworlds.

Examples of good practice

Zaman (2005) combines observations of children playing electronic games in natural environments with observations in controlled settings (in the usability lab), allowing her to get a more accurate picture of children's actual gaming behaviour. She argues that children must not only be observed while exploring and playing a game, but they must also be given the chance to express their opinions and perceptions. In order to fulfil these two objectives, Zaman employs different techniques that allow her to evaluate the usability of the game being tested. These include (1) the 'think aloud' method, in which children are asked to provide a running commentary as they play a game (also taking into account non-verbal responses, if possible); (2) the 'active intervention' method, in which the researcher 'actively intervenes' by asking relevant questions during the task performance (but only after children have explored the game at their own pace first); and (3) the 'laddering' method, in which the researcher asks users why they like or dislike something; when the user answers, the researcher asks 'why' again; this process results in a list of connected elements: 'a ladder', at the end of which the personal value(s) of the user will be revealed. (Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

In our research, asking children to write an essay proved to be reliable – as evidenced by the wide range of viewpoints on sensitive political issues, instances of political incorrectness and the use of slang, all of which can be interpreted as a sign of pupils' frankness. What children produce may provide answers to questions not foreseen by researchers at the beginning of the study. The same strengths, and even greater possibilities, obviously characterize what children produce online as a data source. (Veronika Kalmus, Estonia)

References and further resources

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FAQ 28: What shall I do if a child respondent seems to be at risk?

What's the issue?

When working with children researchers should anticipate the possibility that they will meet children who could be at risk. This can happen both in qualitative and quantitative studies. In qualitative studies researchers often visit children's homes where they might see signs of neglect or even violence. In quantitative studies researchers might find written comments in a questionnaire or a pattern of answers indicating that a child is at risk.

Common practice

Researchers agree that the guiding light in all decisions in such situations should be the best interests of the child. Thus whether to take action or not should be guided by this principle. It is not possible to provide definite answers to what should be done under any circumstances. It is also worth noting that the law in some countries demands that the relevant authorities are notified if there is any suspicion that a child is at risk. An example of the enhanced protection of children in law is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990).

If a particular respondent becomes distressed during the interview it is usually advisable to stop the interview immediately (Sammut-Scerri, Abela, & Vetere, 2012). Sometimes it might be the case that once the respondent calms down, further processing of what happened during the interview could give the researcher insight into the research process and into whether the respondent requires further assistance.

Questions to consider

It is always advisable for researchers who work with children to consider how they are going to deal with the possible situation of discovering that a child is potentially at risk. This involves, amongst other things, being familiar with the relevant legal framework in the respective country and the relevant institutions that deal with child protection. In studies that focus directly on sensitive issues such as pornography or violence it is worth considering whether to give information to all the participants in a study about where they can go to seek further information or assistance.

It is essential to adopt a reflexive stance to understand how participating in a study impacts on participants' beliefs, knowledge, and on the understanding of the research process and of their stories. This will enable researchers to discern whether the situation at hand involves potential risks and whether these risks are related to harm.

Sometimes it may be the case that the children have questions or doubts after the research has been carried out. Sometimes it may be the case that the children become aware that certain situations could be exposing them to risk after the study. Thus it is advisable to debrief the participants after the research and to provide them with information and a contact number that they can make use of if any of these situations arise. Participants can be asked to refer to the channels that they went through to participate in the study if they require further assistance or if want to discuss anything related to the research. It is also useful to ask the participants about how they feel after participating in the research and inquire about their experience of participation (Sammut-Scerri *et al.*, 2012). This could give valuable insight to the researcher as to whether the child could be at risk.

Pitfalls to avoid

If you realize that a child is at risk, you should not speak to the child immediately during the research but through the appropriate channels. You should also avoid shifting into the role of a helper or counsellor. Even though you might be trained to do so, your role during the research requires otherwise.

Be aware that your experiences are different from the children's experiences. Biases have to be kept in check to fully understand whether there is a situation that is risky for the child. It is important that during the research, the you check back with the child to make sure that the correct meaning of what is being said by the child is actually what is being understood.

A researcher's experience

During various research projects I have found that (in some cases) it can be necessary to have a look at children who seem to be at risk. In one case I thought that there might be sexual abuse in the family. I could not talk to the child or to their mother (I had interviews with a child aged eight and their mother), so I looked for an institution of trust to contact. I learned that it could be helpful to contact a priest in the community; thus I told him my suspicion and he started to take care of the child concerning that matter. It is the ethical responsibility of a researcher to actively react when he or she entertains a suspicion on such sensitive issues. (Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink, Austria)

In the UK Children Go Online survey, I was concerned about the child who answered 'yes' to the following sequence of (approximate) questions: have you met someone offline that you first met online, did you go on your own, did the meeting go badly (or well)? In the event, this was a rare occurrence. In writing the consent forms for children, it was made explicit that their answers would be kept confidential and anonymous unless the interviewer had real grounds for concern, in which case she would inform the child that she could not keep this confidential. I also discussed this eventuality with the market research company who were contracted to conduct the interviews with children, so that they could brief their interviewers on appropriate ways to respond. Last, in case after the interview was over children or their parents became concerned about something that had happened, we left all families with a leaflet with a helpline and advice contacts. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

The 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Survey (Finkelhor, 2006) included a check for the interviewer to be completed after the interview. It relied on both the interviewer's observations and on the child's answers recorded on the computer. If the computer algorithm flagged the respondent as possibly in danger, or the interviewer had concerns based on comments or observations during the interview, the interviewer would then say: 'There is someone else connected with our study who may need to call you again. Is there a time that would be convenient?' [Get time and check telephone number.] 'I would also like to give you the address of a website with good information for young people about internet safety. The address is: www.safeteens.com or www.safekids.com'

References and further resources

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FAQ 29: What do I need to know to do research with children online?

What's the issue?

Online methods have become increasingly popular, challenging and complementing traditional data collection methods and raising new methodological issues in media research and other social sciences. In part, online methods may be used to compensate for the difficulties of offline methods, capitalizing on the infrastructure provided by the internet (e.g. in recruiting internet users). In part, online methods are used specifically to research online phenomena (e.g. what do people do on social networking sites?). Online methods raise some new challenges regarding access, consent, and ethics, especially but not only when researching children. They also permit research on emerging phenomena (e.g. new forms of social interaction online).

Common practice

- Online quantitative methods are generally used for researching the demographics and attitudes of internet users (e.g. via an online survey). Online qualitative methods are more suitable for in-depth study of online cultural and social contexts (e.g. virtual ethnography).

- Beyond the role of the facilitator of traditional methods, online applications have offered space for the development of new methods for automated data collection, such as logging and metrics of online visits/usage statistics.

- Online (as offline) research questions should be addressed differently in diverse modalities of communication (chat rooms, forums, blogs, etc.), taking into account the different features and practicalities of each. For example, you can browse through a guest book from a blog without leaving any trace of your presence, but the same cannot be said when you enter a chat room. Real-time communication makes it awkward to observe without interacting, while asynchronous communication makes it possible.

- It is not easy to ensure that all ethical imperatives (e.g. participants' informed consent and confidentiality) are met and, at the same time, manage to carry out fieldwork.

- Online interviews save time and money, but they have to be prepared properly. Furthermore, online methods require a lot of extra skills and effort from researchers. They have to know how to use appropriate software, how to conduct the interview online (how to ask questions, etc.), and be able to follow (written) cues left by interviewees (which means being able to read between the lines, understand specific abbreviations and emoticons, etc.).

- MSN and other instant messaging programmes can be used as tools for research. Keeping a record of MSN conversations, with the interviewee's permission for this, is a good way of using the internet as a research tool and information resource.

- There are no easy answers to the question of authenticity – whether your interviewees online really are who they say they are.

- Considerable value may be drawn from online content itself. As well as specific content produced by online users (such as web pages or blogs), most online use leaves visible traces (messages in guest books, forums, etc.). Content analysis provides many opportunities for researchers but poses some practical problems, as this abundant material can be hard to manage. One commonly used option is to draw a sample (e.g. sampling messages posted in a specific time period or in particular forums).

Questions to consider

Are you using online methods to compensate for the limits of offline methods, or as a matter of convenience? Or because the internet is specifically of interest to the research question? How can you define the population from which you draw your sample? Are you studying individuals' activities online, or online practices or representations (whose relation to offline individuals is less relevant)? Is it important to know, in your research, that the respondents are of the age or gender that

they claim? How will you relate what people do offline and online? Are the ethical issues, specific to online research, taken into account?

Pitfalls to avoid

- Although online methods provide advantages with regard to access to remote populations and automated data collection, which reduce research time, cost, and effort, think carefully about the disadvantages that may affect the quality of the data collected, such as inaccurate sampling frames, irregular response rates, response duplication, and participant deception.

- For researchers aiming to conduct an online survey, there are clear difficulties in drawing a random representative sample online. In online surveys, the respondents are usually self-selected and there is a lack of a central registry of web users that would allow the researcher to follow consistent sampling procedures.

- When conducting real-time online qualitative interviews or online focus groups, ask respondents to use the typing progress indicator (a small pen, keyboard, or a small icon to indicate which person in a conversation is typing) in order to limit the typing to one person at a time.

A researcher's experience

In my online interviews with teenagers (aged 15–18), I noticed that it is of particular importance to find a strategy to reduce the ongoing possibility of distractions and interruptions that might prevent an interviewee from being fully engaged in the interview. I practised three tactics to deal with interruptions and disturbance issues. First, it is crucial to provide participants with flexibility in choosing the time suitable for an interview. Second, we have to inform them in advance about the approximate length of the interviews and ask them to suggest the time, which suited them best. Next, it is useful to ask the participants to acknowledge the importance of not suspending the interview once started. When the interviewee requests an interruption (break), it is particularly recommended when the interviewee asks for a shorter break (up to 20 minutes). However, if the interviewee decides to take a longer break, there is a high possibility that the interview would remain uncompleted, so it is best to try to keep them in the interview. There were also cases when interviewees did not announce their breaks but just disappeared. In such instances, I would recommend being patient and tactical, trying to see the positive side of breaks. I looked at breaks as an opportunity to read the transcription in order to check what had been discussed, what still needed to be examined, and how to continue the interview. It also gave space for reflection by either party. To sum up, being a good online interviewer means being patient. (Bojana Lobe, Slovenia)

In my research on privacy strategies that 13- to 16-year-old teens implement on social media I decided to conduct written interviews via MSN Messenger because the internet was the natural environment of online socialization. The target group consisted of MSN Messenger users and online interviews helped in reaching out to a larger group of teens concerned about their confidentiality. The respondents would not have agreed to face-to-face conversations on such delicate topics. My experience showed that it is vital to thoroughly prepare the young respondents for the interview, explaining how important it is to be fully engaged throughout the conversation, and not dealing with other activities at the time of the interview. The researcher also has to take into account that written interviews take much more time than oral ones, and the respondents might be tired towards the end. To deal with the time pressure, the researcher should carefully choose, formulate, and line up the questions. When analysing the transcripts later, the researcher has to consider the emoticons and other cues to decode whether the respondent was serious, made fun of something, or used irony. My respondents really opened up via the communication channel that was familiar and safe for them, and gave me a lot of sincere and high-quality research material. Furthermore, they could quote and copy messages or posts they had previously made on social media that gave me a lot more information. (Egle Oolo, Estonia)

References and further resources

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Hine, C. (ed.) (2005). *Virtual methods: Issues in social research on the internet*, Oxford: Berg.

Salmons, J. (2010). *Online interviews in real time.* London: Sage Publications.

FAQ 30: What are the key issues when collecting data in more than one country?

What's the issue?

Potentially, any and all dimensions of a research project may take on a different meaning when conducted in a different country – including the questions asked, the terms used, the population studied, and the position of the researcher. There is a persistent tension between the attempt to standardize the research conducted in different countries (e.g. using exactly the same sampling technique, questionnaire survey, approach to analysis) and the attempt to recognize and reflect cultural or social differences across research contexts.

Common practice

- It is often asserted that the standardization of methodological tools and conceptual frameworks is more easily achieved in quantitative research. Conversely, qualitative methods are arguably better at reflecting and responding to specific cultural contexts.

- However, both approaches can be adjusted to comparative research, and both require considerable effort in both research design and data interpretation, so as to understand where the data are, or are not, directly comparable.

- While efforts in comparative research are often concentrated on the construction of samples, the recruitment of respondents, the design of survey questionnaires or interview schedules, and so forth, researchers must also attend to the challenges of data interpretation and analysis. Comparing questionnaire responses across countries (and languages) is easier than comparing interview transcripts, but ensuring that the questionnaire means the same thing in different languages is not easy. Ideally, questionnaires and interview schedules should be translated and then back-translated to check it against the original.

Questions to consider

Why are you undertaking cross-national research, for example, do you expect to find similarities or differences, and why might these be interesting? Which countries do you want to compare and why (what are their interesting and relevant points of similarity and difference)? What are the practical issues to be addressed in comparing across countries? These might include the means of contacting children or obtaining their consent. Are there also significant differences within countries (e.g. the two language communities within Belgium, or the north/south divide that characterizes many countries)? Even if words can be translated, do they have a different meaning in a different cultural context? Are findings typically disseminated differently in the countries you are working in?

Pitfalls to avoid

There are many pitfalls, and they arise mainly from either the fact that researchers will be more familiar with one country than another, or from the fact that researchers from different countries must collaborate together. Typically, you take your own context for granted, not perceiving its distinctive features, and see the other context as unusual, not understanding how it makes sense to those who live there. While the major differences between countries are obvious (e.g. language), more subtle differences can easily be overlooked (e.g. expectations regarding parenting). Too often it is convenience rather than the research rationale that directs the project (e.g. having access to researchers, or respondents, in another country, even though that country may not provide the optimal point of comparison).

A researcher's experience

In our research, we translated questionnaires used in the Young People, New Media (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999) and SAFT (2006) projects, to be answered in a self-completion survey by Portuguese children aged 9–14. We

found that expressions such as 'stepmother' or 'stepfather' are sensitive for Portuguese children, as the Portuguese words ('madrasta', 'padrasto') have a derogatory meaning, associated with 'unkind people', so we found alternative words. Also, questions about media use in children's bedrooms (or 'own rooms') did not fit the reality of children of very low SES [socio-economic status]. Last, the designation of the place where the child lives and play outdoors may also be ambiguous in different cultures. In Portugal, a large amount of children live in flats and don't have access to private gardens. The experience of playing outdoors is mostly associated with public spaces. Houses with private gardens are mostly associated with high SES, and they are called 'vivendas'. However, a child who lives in an illegal house self-made by their parents (in a slum, for instance) may use the word 'vivenda' to describe the place where he/she lives. In a survey that named different kinds of places to live, children's answers showed that their naming of those places is appropriated in their own socio-cultural terms. (José Alberto Simões, Portugal)

References and further resources

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FAQ 31: What are some good approaches to using creative visual research methods with children?

What's the issue?

In recent years, researchers from a wide range of disciplines, for example, sociology, psychology, media studies, social policy, education, and health, have shown a growing interest in making use of the new creative visual methods in social research. Such approaches have been especially popular while doing research involving children and young people. Participants in such studies are first asked to take the time to apply their playful and creative attention in making a visual (drawing, photo, video, collage) or three-dimensional artefact (out of clay, Lego, etc.), and later to reflect on it so as to provide new information and insight into different aspects of social life that might not be accessible with more traditional qualitative research methods, for example, interviews or focus groups.

Common practice

- In comparison with traditional research methods where research participants are asked to orally reflect on a variety of topics and hence to provide instant answers on complicated and sometimes very personal matters, creative processes take more time and thus also demand greater reflection on the part of the participant.

- Creative research approaches aim to generate a more collaborative mode to the whole research procedure. On the one hand, research participants have greater editorial control over their material as they can erase or modify their artefacts and thereby portray aspects important to them. On the other hand, researchers should not try to impose their own readings on the created artefacts, but rather give "voice" to the participants for interpreting and commenting on their work.

- Researchers should acknowledge that it is not possible to state beforehand what kind of data will be produced in a study involving creative methods.

Questions to consider

What are the additional qualities you intend to gain by using creative visual research methods? Are you ready to "go with the flow" and make quick changes to the initial plan as the situation unfolds? Are you seen as a person of authority to the children or teens? If yes, then pay great attention to the way questions are formulated, as fear of doing something "wrong" could inhibit participants' creativity. How skilled are the participants expected to be in the creative processes? Are any special skills (e.g. Photoshop, video editing) needed for completing the tasks? How much time will the creative process demand, in your opinion? Do you find drawing and explaining (simultaneously or straight after) useful, or do you want to provide time for creative processes and give the participants a sense of perspective in relation to their creation?

Pitfalls to avoid

- Individuals have different levels of artistic skills and different levels of confidence, hence some participants may first feel a bit uneasy and more inhibited when asked to produce a creative artefact. Hence, you should at least try to offer a variety of choices that would allow the participants to exercise their agency and creativity to the fullest.

- It is important to take into account the main audience when presenting these creative assignments as students' (un)conscious need to earn the approval of peers might still have an effect on their work and joint discussions that follow. Answering is a form of self-presentation and group affiliation is important for teenagers, so in many situations individual behaviours and attitudes could be sacrificed for group mentality, and norms and values imagined to be shared with others.

- Be aware of the fact that visuals created by children/young people may often contain stereotypes and may thus sometimes appear to be objectifying "others". At the same time, they might also allow you to witness how participants relate to these "others" and position themselves. In fact, you should not fall victim to the belief that these images are

self-explanatory and should not feel intimidated and uneasy when asking young children to provide interpretations of their own works. Furthermore, rather than focusing on WHAT they have made, be more focused on finding out WHY they have decided to make such an artefact and WHAT the artefact meant for the maker.

- Do not only focus on the oral (or written) interpretations of the participants and the group and by doing so, dismiss the visual dimension of their study. Rather, search for additional theories and ways for understanding the data produced through creative methods.

- As the personal meanings and perceptions communicated through such an approach are often ambiguous, obscure, and ever changing, you cannot take the role of omniscient expert. Rather, be creative, much like the method. Giving participants plenty of options in the process of creation and accepting deviations from the original plan to follow interesting sub-topics are just a few aspects that can benefit the research.

Examples of a study using visual methods

Our experiences with creative visual methods suggest that such an approach helps to generate respondent curiosity and maintain their interest in the study procedure as children and young people sincerely take pleasure in the research process. Furthermore, as the participants can easily modify their creative works, they seemed to feel in control over their own process of expression and thereby also more at ease with the need to comment on their own experiences and perceptions.

When using creative methods (especially in research with teens), the moderator should be prepared to talk about material that could be considered provocative: researching the perceived persona of an online pervert (in-depth interviews combined with previously made individual drawings of online perverts) presented a situation where an interviewee had drawn a penis in detail. As the interviewee explained – it was partly tongue-in-cheek humour and partly his real perception. In addition, he had drawn a picture, more common to the standards of that sample, of a filthy-looking man on the other side of the paper, in case the drawing of a penis was 'a bit too much'. Moderators of such studies should be prepared to give extra confirmation about the absence of 'right' answers in creative exercises.

The moderator can help the interviewees feel more comfortable and open up. In one study it was evident in many parts of the discussion when high school students were a bit reluctant to talk about certain things and behaviours. The moderator provided personal examples that offered a possibility to relate and feel more relaxed to talk about their own experiences, for instance, where participants described their normal web routines: Moderator: 'In terms of time, how much time do you spend online every day? Or are you online every day?'/F5: 'Oh, this is brutal, I'm afraid to say it.'/Moderator: 'So that you won't feel bad, I can tell you mine. I added my hours up and well ... on average I'm online for 12 hours per day...'/F5: 'Okay, then mine really isn't so bad...'. (Maria Murumaa-Mengel, Estonia)

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FAQ 32: What's the best way to ask about digital skills?

What's the issue?

Children's digital skills are no longer just about clicking the right buttons – they are increasingly related to the social character of the activities children perform online, and the content they may produce and upload themselves. An important pitfall to avoid is measuring skills in a too limited or too narrow way, which does not take into consideration the different aspects of digital skills.

Common practice

Skills are characterized by different dimensions, which should be surveyed by several items per dimension. Broadly, skills are divided into three dimensions (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010):

- Instrumental or operational skills: the ability to use computer technology and the internet (e.g. being able to install programmes and click the right buttons).
- Structural/information skills: these contain, on the one hand, formal internet skills or the competency to navigate on the web (with its hyperlinks and dynamic information) and, on the other hand, informational or evaluation skills, the ability to evaluate the reliability of information found on websites and to cross-reference to information correctly.
- Strategic skills: the capacity of applying skills in everyday life by proactively searching for information and basing decisions on this information (e.g. benefiting financially from comparing products online or saving time after checking timetables online).

In addition to these dimensions, questions can be included about children's *social skills* with the increasingly social character of children's internet use due to the popularity of social networking sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.). These online social skills mainly concern communication, self-disclosure, and privacy. For example, children need to be aware of current "netiquette" rules, such as which personal information they can publish online and for whom (i.e., on a public website or a private profile).

Another type of skill that has become increasingly important to ask about is children's creative and productive skills. Due to the innovations of Web 2.0, children can produce and upload user-generated content that may be visible to a wide public online. It is therefore important to include questions about their skills and knowledge to create, produce, and upload content.

Pitfalls to avoid

Children are often considered as internet-savvy, emphasizing the quite natural capability of the younger generation to use and cope with an increasingly digitalized world. They are seen as the "net generation" (Tapscott, 1998), "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) or "homo zappiens" (Veen & Vrakking, 2006). However, research into children's internet skills, for example, shows that they often lack the required evaluative or strategic skills, that is, they do not know how to evaluate the usefulness and reliability of internet information (e.g. Walraven, Brand-Gruwel, & Boshuizen, 2009; Kuiper, Volman, & Terwel, 2008). Hence, it is important to measure children's skills in surveys by a range of items for the different skill dimensions.

Example of a study measuring skills

The most valid way to measure skills are performance tests (e.g. van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010), as these are a direct observation of children's abilities. When lacking the ability to perform such tests, especially in large-scale surveys, it is important to take into account the different dimensions of digital skills. A good example can be found at http://alexandervandeursen.nl/serendipity5/uploads/pubs/IJHCI_DeursenDijkPeters_2012.pdf

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FAQ 33: What are good approaches to conducting focus groups with parents?

What's the issue?

In the last few years internet parental mediation has been widely studied by academics (see Garmendia *et al.*, 2012). What types of strategies parents apply for children, when they apply these strategies, how these strategies contribute to reducing risks, etc. are usually the main questions addressed in most of these studies. Most of these researchers have developed a quantitative children-centred approach. Parents and children's statements linked to different questions related to parental mediation have been contrasted, but little formal attention has been paid to parents' perceptions regarding their own internet parenting habits. Why do they apply a specific type of strategy? How do they feel when their children are online? Do they have any concerns or worries? What are their perceptions about their responsibilities with parenting the internet? Qualitative methodology, specifically, focus groups with parents, are recommended in order to find out how parents perceive their role as mediators with the internet.

Common practice

Qualitative methods are commonly used by researchers to explore in-depth specific questions where the facts need to be contrasted with the perceptions of the individuals that are being analysed, or where sensitive issues related to the problem addressed need to be explored in depth. One of the most effective qualitative methods to get these results is the focus group.

The importance of this method lies on the interaction established between the participants (parents) rather than in the questions addressed by the researcher to the observed group. Focus groups tend to be shaped by the spontaneity of all the participants who have been recruited and not by the 'directivity' between the observer (researcher) and the observed (participants) (see Callejo, 2001: 17). One of the main advantages of focus groups is that their open structure allows all the individuals to react in a natural way – agreeing or disagreeing – against the answers of the other individuals. The synergy that comes up in the group permits the researcher to obtain results that could not be obtained with qualitative methods such as personal interviews (see Stewart, Shamdasani, & Dennis, 2007: 43).

Questions to consider

The first thing to take into account when organizing a focus group with parents is to have a very deep knowledge of the topic that is going to be addressed. Researchers need to be very clear about the specific issues that they want to be addressed by the participants, and the goals that they want to achieve. Perhaps this could seem a very obvious detail, but due to the specific characteristics of this technique, exhaustive work is required before facing the group that is to be studied.

Focus groups dynamics cannot be compared with other qualitative methods such as group interviews in which the researcher or observer can participate in the debate. In this specific case, researchers need to adopt a neutral role regarding the group studied. They have to present the topic to be discussed in a very open way, and should have a guide with questions to be addressed during the debate. They might act in the focus group as a simple guide to expose a wide open topic (not closed or direct questions), and their interventions may be limited to specific occasions when the group discussions need to be re-focused.

This technique with parents is recommended to obtain results related to personal perceptions about topics that may be very sensitive for parents. There is ample evidence, mostly based on quantitative studies, showing some tendency amongst parents to overestimate the mediation strategies they apply to their children as well as awareness of the risks that their children may encounter online, and how they cope with them (see Hasebrink *et al.*, 2009). Being in a group

usually allows the participants to show their perceptions and to express themselves in a more natural way, and topics such as sexual content, cyberbullying, meeting strangers, etc. can be addressed with more spontaneity.

It is also important to choose an appropriate location in order to make the group feel comfortable in establishing a conversation about sensitive topics. The children's school is usually considered one of the most convenient places to develop the study as all the participants are familiar with it. It is also important to make the participants feel confident that the information that is going to be discussed in that session will not be disclosed with their personal information.

The sample characteristics can also influence the dynamics of the focus group. As far as the number of group members is concerned, an ideal group is no more than eight parents and not less than six. The personal characteristics of the parents also need to be taken into account. Individuals may be recruited with a similar socio-economic status (level of income and education). The gender or age of the parents should not influence the recruitment process, but those individuals may be selected who usually spend more time helping or guiding their children when they are online. This will help researchers conclude in an indirect way if the parent's gender has an influence when mediating the children's use of the internet or not.

Pitfalls to avoid

There are few bad practices that you need to avoid in order not to negatively influence the focus group dynamic.

It is clear that even though the recruitment of the sample is done with the objective of collecting individuals with very similar socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics in order to permit a more fluent and natural dialogue between them, every individual has her/his own personality. Try to make a quick scan of the participants at the beginning of the session, and identify those with stronger or weaker personalities. Opinion leaders as well as individuals who don't express themselves in a discussion can influence the process of the study. Make sure that the interventions of all the participants are balanced, and that every opinion of every member of the group is valid.

Encourage the group to express their feelings and perceptions. They need to feel that the most important matter is the discussion they are going to lead. In order to achieve this goal, you could introduce yourself at the beginning in a very discreet way, trying to avoid the participants considering you as a judge of their opinions.

You could have a negative influence, even provoking a pause in the discussion, if you address direct questions at the participants, and above all, when very sensitive questions are being approached such as cases of cyberbullying and how parents mediate in these cases. Parents usually show themselves reluctant to recognize that their children do encounter risks online, and even more when their children have been involved in some risky or harmful activities or situations as perpetrators. The "third person" example may be an appropriate resource in order to make parents know that there are real cases when children have been victims or perpetrators of risky activities, and to give them examples of how those parents have acted in order to cope with that situation. Be impartial in every topic that you expose to the group.

Do not forget that this is not a casual conversation, and when the sample is going to be recruited (by yourself or another external person) avoid participants having close relationships amongst themselves (family, friends, etc.).

Examples of a study using focus groups with parents

A focus group with parents is the most appropriate technique in order to explore in depth the internet parental mediation process. In this specific case, a mixed methods design was adopted, specifically, a sequential explanatory design. As Lobe, Livingstone, & Haddon (2007: 15) state, the main purpose of this mixed design was to use the qualitative results to assist in explaining and interpreting the findings of the quantitative part.

The aim of this research was to examine the patterns that Spanish parents established to mediate their children's internet use (types of strategies, amount of time, connection between risks, harm and opportunities, and the strategies applied by parents, judgments of both children and parents related to the process, etc.). These premises were explained through the quantitative analyses, but as in most of the studies that focused on parental mediation, it was found that the effectiveness of parental mediation strategies with diminishing harm or risks and increasing

children's advantages online could not be verified without taking into account parents' perceptions and opinions. This is why focus groups with parents were organized.

The main purpose of this qualitative technique was to observe and analyse parents' discussions in order to explore in depth what motivated them to apply certain strategies. All of the questions studied implied sensitive topics related to individual perceptions: how confident they felt with helping their children when going online, how effective they perceived that parental mediation strategies were in order to avoid or cope with risks or harm, what motivated them to trust or not their children when they went online, which worries or concerns they noticed when minors were using the internet, etc. Focus groups with parents allowed these questions to be answered, as well as new paths in the research of parental mediation to be detected.

These groups were organized in two different public schools. Parents were recruited by an external person (the school psychologist), who followed all the instructions given by the researcher in order to select individuals with similar socio-economic characteristics who did not have any close relationship between them (relatives or friends). Groups were recruited attending to the age of the children. The sample consisted of four focus groups of individuals whose children were aged between 9 and 16 (the same age as in the quantitative sample). The first group were parents of children aged 9 and 10, the second were parents of children aged 11 and 12, the third were parents of children aged 13 and 14, and the fourth group were parents of children aged 15 and 16. The maximum number of individuals per group was 10 and the minimum 8.

As an external observer, it seems necessary to stress the positive as well as the negative experiences. In the first instance, all the parents recruited to participate in the focus group attended the appointment. Most of them – aware that the observer was studying children's use of the internet – considered this occasion a good chance to show the researcher certain worries or concerns related to their children's safety online as well as asking for advice. As a general rule, participants shared in a very open way all the topics that the observer exposed. Parents had very lively and enthusiastic conversations about different issues and shared all the experiences related to their children's activities online. Participants identified their own experiences with the others'.

In parallel to this, when very sensitive topics, such as risks or harm (cyberbullying above all), were addressed, the conversations stopped, and at this point the observer had to intervene with 'the third person' example in order to encourage them to talk openly. Knowing that their personal information was not going to be disclosed allowed the parents to expose very sensitive situations that some of their children had experienced. It was also interesting to notice that when the observer introduced herself as a researcher and gave them some information related to her experience with studying children on the internet, participants felt embarrassed to starting any conversation. In order to solve this, the observer had to clarify that the only source for her study was their perceptions and opinions. Right at the moment that parents were assured that none of their conversations were going to be judged by the researcher, the dynamics of the focus groups started working. (Maialen Garmendia, Spain)

Even though the recruitment of parents was a very complex process, the results obtained with the focus groups were very satisfactory. And this is why parental mediation researchers should apply the focus group technique in order to explore in depth parents' needs and perceptions with the parenting process.

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FAQ 34: What are good approaches to conducting focus groups with children?

What's the issue?

Using focus groups in social research is relatively new and was first understood as a utility method in the preparatory phase of quantitative studies, or to foster the interpretation of qualitative data (see Hoppe *et al.*, 1995: 102). In the late 1990s focus groups were still under-represented in the social sciences, even though they can look back on a long tradition in market and medical research, but the fields of application have new been expanded (see Gibbs, 1997: 1–3). Today, focus groups are an integral part of the methodological canon and well used to take advantage of group dynamics, tensions between the participants, and to gain more information compared to single interviews. However, they should not be regarded as a substitute for questionnaires or single interviews. They are ideally used in the course of method triangulation, for example, along with (qualitative or quantitative) questionnaires and single interviews.

Methods that are used for adults cannot be used in the same manner with children. Thus, when conducting focus groups with children, there are some other factors that need to be considered in addition to the traditional issues related to conducting focus groups mainly because of cognitive, linguistic, and psychological differences between children and adults (Gibson, 2012).

Common practice

The most important thing in successfully conducting focus groups is to create a trusting atmosphere between the participants themselves and between them and the moderator (the researcher that conducts the focus group). It may therefore be helpful to start with warm-up questions or an entry scenario. For children, an activity where they each create their own name tag and say something about themselves could be useful to establish a warm atmosphere and a sense of trust of the researcher and of the rest of the group. Once the discussion has started, the moderator should hold back as far as possible, to allow the participants to talk freely. Materials provided for discussion should also match the children's cognitive abilities – for conducting effective focus groups with children, a moderator, as well as having knowledge of interviewing skills and group dynamics, also needs experience of working with children, together with knowledge of their developmental processes.

In the implementation of focus groups, the participants are to be seen as experts and should be treated with respect. Children and adolescents particularly enjoy this status and are usually happy to hand over information. In this context it may be helpful to inform the participants about the research aims and to establish the ground rules at the beginning. A pleasant conversational setting will facilitate the implementation, as well as providing some food and drinks and relaxed and comfortable chairs or seating areas. When conducting focus groups with pupils or in school facilities a setting should be provided that is not reminiscent of a classroom (see also Bauer *et al.*, 2010: 18). Sometimes an unfamiliar setting may provoke anxiety, especially for younger children. Moreover, participants should be provided with a reward as appreciation of their help. When dealing with older teens the reward could be offered as a form of material compensation after the focus groups have taken place, but it should not be confused with payment for information. Younger children may receive small gifts.

In order to facilitate evaluation and to gain additional information, it is highly recommended to record the focus groups on video. The use of modern video and audio-recording devices does not require extensive technical training, but it opens up the visual level for analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, the use of name tags or badges may also be helpful in order to assign names later on. To put children at ease about recording the focus groups, it might be useful to allow them to familiarize themselves with the recording devices, possibly even recording themselves or their peers, and then playing it back to them so that they understand how they sound (Porcellato, Dughill, & Springet, 2002).

Questions to consider

Related to the research design and the research question as well as to the age of the children and adolescents, it has to be decided whether the focus groups should be homogeneous concerning sex, or a mixed group, and whether the moderator should be a woman or a man, or two researchers of different sexes together. Hoppe *et al.* (1995) suggest homogeneous groups when working with children. A second key issue in the organization of the groups is what age range should be represented. Most of the time it is best to avoid large age discrepancies (see Hoppe *et al.*, 1995). Morgan *et al.* (2002: 12–14) suggest more possibilities and opportunities for increasing the involvement of children or to break their potential reluctance, for example, helpful figures as alternative personalities (e.g. hand puppets; see Paus-Hasebrink *et al.*, 2004), role-playing scenarios, games, or pen-and-paper exercises.

With respect to the number of participants in children's focus groups, it is good to aim for 4–6 children per group and for children aged between 6 and 10. The number may be increased to 8 or more with older children, depending on the research question and aims. The duration of focus groups with children under the age of 10 should not be more than 45 minutes, while this may be extended to 60 minutes for older children (Gibson, 2012; Heary & Hennessy, 2002).

Consent for participation from the children's parents must be obtained prior to the focus groups. The assent of the children should also be sought. Both should include an explanation of the procedures, and information about how the material provided will be used, together with information about the recording of the interview. Participants should also be allowed to leave the focus group before it ends, and given that minors may be involved, it is important that parents are aware of this and can be accessed if necessary.

A further ethical consideration for focus groups with children is the identification and monitoring of the participants' stress levels. This is usually a role held by the assistant moderator who also takes notes and assists the focus group without being an active participant. Their role needs to be explained to the children to ensure that the children do not feel observed or suspicious.

Pitfalls to avoid

A focus group is not to be understood as an extended form of an interview. It is therefore not your role to ask questions directly to all participants; rather, you must take care to engage all participants equally, and to avoid leaders in a group dominating the conversation. To realize this, strong moderation may be required, but ideally the participants will start a real conversation and discuss the topics amongst themselves.

As previously stated, it is a good idea to record the focus group on video. If this is not possible for technical or legal reasons, the co-researcher could take detailed notes, as otherwise it will not be possible to assign the voices of the individuals in the evaluation.

Example of a study: Youth – Media – Violence

This study (see Bauer *et al.*, 2010) on violence in new media focused on the experiences of adolescents with cybermobbing, violent computer games, and videos with violent content. It asked for forms, methods, and the framing conditions of the reception of violence in school and media as well as communication about violence. A focus group design therefore seemed particularly useful. However, the researchers chose a slightly different variation and used a workshop design. The workshops consisted of 8–10 students from one class, and were mixed groups in order to reflect the class dynamic. The students were carefully selected in cooperation with the teacher. In the workshops, which lasted 5–6 hours, the researchers used techniques such as mind-mapping, and watched videos containing violence with the students, in order to discuss them later. Three researchers were present, one working as moderator and two as observers, who focused on the verbal and non-verbal interaction and on crucial phases of the discussions. This study can therefore be regarded as an innovative, extended form of a focus group setting, nevertheless drawing on its basic methodological principles. It is important to note that these basic

principles should always be considered, but scientific methods are subject to change, and may and need to be adapted to the specific research questions.

Example of a study: Using focus groups to discuss sensitive topics with children

This study (see Hoppe *et al.*, 1995) focused on the attitudes and beliefs of children towards HIV and AIDS. Focus groups were used as a preliminary, explorative tool to identify the knowledge about the topics and to generate hypotheses. In the group discussions, two moderators (male and female) were used. The questions were carefully developed in cooperation with an advisory board consisting of parents, AIDS experts, and teachers. In the discussions, rules of discussion were established and a focus was put on an easy warm-up phase. After the discussions, children were allowed to ask questions themselves, which is good practice, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. The study is therefore a good example of a classical focus group design, and features all the important aspects of focus groups, as outlined above.

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IV. APPROACHES TO DATA ANALYSIS

FAQ 35: What are some good approaches to analysing qualitative data?

What's the issue?

A vital element in successful qualitative data analysis is to respect the difference between qualitative and quantitative research. The difference is, as Strauss (1987) puts it, not least in how data are treated analytically. In fact, it all depends on the questions researchers define at the start and on the specific methodologies they choose to obtain the desired data. Qualitative methods comprise a wide variety of ways of collecting data, with distinct implications in terms of analysis. Are these data obtained through interviews and focus groups, or are they the result of participant observation? A distinction is usually made between "naturally occurring data", which correspond to different forms of discourse, texts, and oral expressions that might be observed and registered, and "researcher-provoked data", comprising different methodologies devised by the researcher to address particular issues (Silverman, 2006). Although this distinction shouldn't be taken too rigidly, it stresses the importance of considering the process through which particular discourses and texts are created and obtained and, ultimately, how they may be analysed.

Common practice

Since the most common way of gathering data in qualitative research comes from interviews and focus groups, the transcripts of such interviews (usually recorded) are the basis for textual analysis. The way an interview is conducted (in a more or less "structured" fashion) affects the nature of the verbal exchange taking place, and therefore what you can or may anticipate in terms of analysis.

A common way to approach qualitative data analysis in this case is the construction of themes. Sometimes these have already been decided when designing the study, or if the data collection is structured around these predefined themes. In other cases the themes are constructed afterwards. When themes are not constructed beforehand (as is the case with grounded theory research), it is usual that the data analysis actually starts before the data collection is over, and data collection and data analysis are often conducted in parallel, the preliminary analysis being used to decide which areas should be examined in more detail. Coding is an important part of qualitative data analysis and is the process of grouping interviewees' responses into categories that bring together the similar ideas, concepts, or themes that have been discovered.

The analysis of qualitative data usually involves the selection of quotes to support the presentation of the findings. Such quotes are usually anonymous but, if the interviewee is identified, it is common practice to let him or her see the quote and the context (the surrounding text). Qualitative analysis is also a prime field for participatory research, by letting respondents review their own transcripts and to comment on them (also using those comments as part of the research material), help to select meaningful areas of analysis and concern, thus promoting the researchers' accountability.

Besides the above method, other types of analysis that rely not only on content but also on form are also common and useful. "What is said" and also "how it is said" is the prime issue for such methods. Discourse analysis provides a considerable range of techniques for studying different textual formats (for an overview, see Silverman, 2006: 223–240).

Questions to consider

When designing a qualitative study it is worthwhile to think thoroughly about how the data is to be analysed.

Good planning can save a lot of time and energy and, as a rule of thumb, the looser the structure is at the data collection stage, the more time you can expect to spend on the data analysis.

The use of software for qualitative data analysis has increased rapidly over the past few years. Researchers are, however, not quite agreed on whether it improves the quality of the analysis. Also, some software packages tend to, by their own design, skew the analysis into more qualitative details of categorizing the data.

Advanced methods of discourse analysis require further training and are time-demanding, although they have a great potential in the exploring of the cognitive, social, moral, and emotional processes at work in the act of communicating.

Although, in general, interview transcripts constituted the basic materials for the above suggestions of analysis, other textual data – such as field notes, documents, etc. – may be also subjected to the same methodologies.

Other forms of data collecting, such as visual data gathered through video recording or photography, require additional qualitative methodologies of analysis, with particular epistemological implications in terms of the evidence provided.

Pitfalls to avoid

- The issue of confidentiality: it is important to respect the privacy of the interviewees and ensure that whatever information they give to you as a researcher does not backfire on them in any way. This is extremely important when working with data from children. You should therefore have the data under good control:
  - Do not leave transcripts, pictures, videotapes, or whatever you are working with lying about in public.
  - Do not make unnecessary copies, and keep a good track of the location of all copies (in both electronic and other formats).
  - Do not hand your material to anyone without going over the handling procedures.
- The issue of status: despite the fact that qualitative research has a long history within the social sciences, it is still quite common to see a tendency to impose the ideas of quantitative analysis on qualitative data. An example of this is when increasing the number of interviews or focus groups is thought to improve the generalizability of the findings. If generalizability is what you want, use quantitative methods.
- The issue of qualitative data analysis as common sense: everyone engages in some form of qualitative analysis in daily life. This leads some people to the erroneous conclusion that no special training is needed to analyse qualitative data except good common sense. Hopefully, though, the vastly increased use of qualitative techniques in marketing research in recent years has done much to correct these misunderstandings.
- The issue of condensation: invariably, qualitative data analysis is a process of condensation in which a vast amount of data has to be condensed in a meaningful way, both theoretically and generally. This relates to at least three different problems:
  - Drifting: the results are poorly rooted in the original data.
  - Dumping: the results are simply not based on the data and at best present an oversimplified picture.
  - Data drowning: too much data has been collected and the researcher fails to get any meaningful grip on the data.

An example of qualitative data analysis

In a research project on digital inclusion and participation, a specific questionnaire adapting several questions of the EU Kids Online survey was applied to a sample of socially disadvantaged children (aged 9–16) in Portugal. The analysis compared the perceptions of Portuguese children, based on an open-ended question about online risk from the EU Kids Online survey and two open-ended questions about online safety from a purposive survey of disadvantaged children (see Ponte, Simões, and Jorge, 2013).

Considering children's answers to the open-ended questions as texts, we conducted a textual analysis of the open-ended answers, following Fairclough's (2003) methodology. As we have noticed, different wording of questions may lead to different response processes and to distinctive places in which children position themselves, from apparently excluded of the risk situations to keen advisers of their peers on online safety, while also reflecting their social and cultural contexts. This process of comparing and exploring children's answers to the open-ended questions led us to acknowledge the relevance of the different ways of wording the issue of online risk and safety. Unexpected answers stressed the need to listen to children expressing their internet experience in their own terms. (Cristina Ponte, José Simões, and Ana Jorge, Portugal)

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FAQ 36: What are some good approaches to analysing quantitative data?

What's the issue?

The same general principles apply to the analysis of quantitative data in all studies, no matter whether they include children or adults. Basically the aim of any data analysis is to discover patterns and themes in the data and when the data is of a quantitative nature, certain skills are required. With the development of computer programs for statistical analysis it has become quite easy to perform very complicated analysis which has opened up many opportunities for researchers. This, however, creates at least two potential problems. The first is that computers do not question whether it is sensible at all to perform the calculations that they are used for – researchers simply get results. The second potential problem is that not many people understand complicated statistical analysis. Based on this it is possible to give the following crude but simple advice. First, make sure you know what you are doing and second, aim for analysis which that audience will understand.

Common practice

Based on the discussion from Newton and Rudestam (1999), it is possible to set the following 10 rules for the successful analysis of quantitative data:

- Get comfortable with your data. As the data is the raw material on which the results are to be built, the data files must be handled with care.
- Thoroughly explore your data, twice. It is easy to make errors when handling the data (recoding or computing) and doing the analysis.
- Use graphics to display your results. A visual representation of data can reveal the meaning and implications of your study in a way that abstract numbers might conceal.
- Replicate research with new samples and in new settings to ensure the validity of the results.
- Remember the distinction between statistical and substantive significance.
- Remember the distinction between statistical significance and effect size.
- Do not expect statistics to speak for themselves. It is not enough to fill endless pages with tables and graphs. The goal of data analysis is to present an organized argument that supports or does not support a particular position.
- Keep it simple when possible. Complex statistics can lead to confusion.
- Consult with other researchers. No one is an expert in all areas, and discussing your findings with colleagues is likely to sharpen your arguments and help you in detecting errors.
- Do not expect your research to be perfect. Research is often more complicated and more difficult than expected. The effects (if they are detected) are weaker and the results more controversial.

Questions to consider

As with qualitative data some of the most important questions to consider regarding the data analysis have to be dealt with when designing the study. A focused data collection will usually make life much easier when it comes to the data analysis stage.

Pitfalls to avoid

- Do not conduct analysis under time pressure as this is one of the worst enemies of good data analysis. Handling quantitative data requires care and attention.
- Resist the temptation to present too much raw data; try to make a focused analysis rather than presenting all questions from a survey

- Do not ignore the concept of statistical power when analysing quantitative data.
- Do not speak above the level of your audience. If percentages and cross-tabulation is what the audience is looking for, it is perhaps better if logistic regression models can be avoided.
- Do not oversimplify things.
- Do not make claims that are outside the scope of your data.

A researcher's experience

Sometimes research is conducted under time pressure and that increases significantly the possibility of errors in the findings. One example of how time pressure and undue caution can lead to mistakes is when I was working on a database which included amongst other things, information on children's leisure activities. When making a variable which was supposed to classify the kids into two groups those active in sports and those who were not active I failed to remember that many children engage in more than one sport, and thus classified those who participated in two or three sports activities as being not active instead of active. This error was then discovered two years later when the data was looked at again in another study. (Kjartan Olafsson, Iceland)

References and further resources

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FAQ 37: How do I bring qualitative and quantitative data together?

What's the issue?

Qualitative and quantitative methods have different strengths and different weaknesses. The qualitative (exploratory) part can be seen as the phase to generate the hypotheses and theory, which could be verified later on in a quantitative (confirmatory) section of the study. The quantitative part could be used for generalization of qualitative findings (Lobe, 2008). For example, the strength of quantitative data lies in answering questions such as, how many children use the internet and are children who use the internet a lot more or less likely to read a lot of books? The strength of qualitative methods lies in answering questions such as, what does the internet mean for children? As Patton (1990: 132) has suggested, "qualitative data can put flesh on the bones of quantitative results, bringing results to life through in-depth case elaboration."

Common practice

Researchers often use qualitative and quantitative material to complement each other. A qualitative study is sometimes conducted to follow up on findings from quantitative data and to help in understanding what the figures actually mean. A quantitative study is sometimes conducted to follow up on findings from qualitative data. A third way is to design a study where qualitative and quantitative data is collected and analysed at the same time. Results from one method can be extended or triangulated by using another method. The prevalent use of quantitative data is to focus inquiry on a discrete set of variables to test a specific hypothesis or research question. Alternately, the prevalent use of qualitative data is to open the study through presenting the large, interconnected complexities of a situation. Thus, each type of data has advantages and can extend, in certain ways, understanding a researchable problem. This occurs when the researcher sequences the two types of methods, either qualitative first as exploratory, followed by quantitative as explanatory, or vice versa. Further, many researchers begin the qualitative part first if the problem has not been explored much in the literature. In this case, the researcher develops quantitative measures from a qualitative data because measures are not currently available, extant measures do not represent populations being studied, or the topic has not been explored much by others (Creswell, 1999: 460). However, if the mere goal of combined use of qualitative and quantitative data is the mutual validation and convergence of the result arising from different methods, that imposes the independent and concurrent employment of measurement operations throughout the study, aiming at testing the same hypostasis or answering the same part of a research question (Lobe, 2008).

Questions to consider

- Is your research question of that nature that requires it to be answered by both types of data?
- What is the rationale for combining both types of data?
- Do you want to enhance and elaborate results from one method with results from the other? Or is it your aim to increase the validity of our study by using more than one set of data in order to get convergent findings?
- What kind of mixed methods design will you use? Will you start first by a qualitative or a quantitative part?
- Which part will be a dominant one in the study? Are both given equal emphasis?
- How do you want to present your findings?

Pitfalls to avoid

Using both types of data is not ultimately preferred to any other form of research, such as solely quantitative or solely qualitative research. Including more methods does not necessarily lead to better or more valid data. It usually involves more than twice as much work, particularly if the goal is not just to use each separate method effectively but also to combine them effectively. Each researcher should consider the purposes of the study (Lobe, 2008).

A common pitfall is when researchers base their choice of research method not on the research subject and the nature of the questions they wish to answer, but just use whatever method they are most used to or whatever method their research tradition dictates them to use (e.g. positivism – surveys, constructivism – in-depth interviews).

The concept of triangulations is often misguidedly used as a synonym for the concept of mixed methods research. It is useful to bear in mind that triangulation is only one of the possible designs and reasons for combining qualitative and quantitative methods and data. Although complementarity appears to be quite a frequent driving force for the combined use, it is much less related to mixed methods research for those who are only starting to learn about it.

Data should never be regarded as "true" and "false" since differences between various sets of data might be as significant and revealing as similarities.

References and further resources

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FAQ 38: How do I compare data from parents and children?

What's the issue?

Many studies have shown that there is not always coherence in answers from parents and children when asked about the same issues. For example, parents might say that they monitor closely what their children do online, while the children might say that their parents do not closely monitored them. In the case of internet-related practices, the social desirability bias might manifest itself in the form of parents trying to depict themselves as "good parents" and children trying to pose as "cool kids."

Common practice

To collect data from both parents (and adults, such as teachers) and children is not uncommon in studies where the focus is on children's behaviour. It is possible to combine information from parents and children in various ways, but these might be seen as the main alternatives:

- Parent as only informant (proxy)
- Parent as main informant and child as supplementary informant
- Parent as main informant and child as main informant
- Child as main informant and parent as supplementary informant
- Child as only informant

All these approaches have their advantages as well as shortcomings. There is a twofold advantage of comparing data from parents and children. First, it enables cross-validation of information on children's behaviour as adults are often more precise when it comes to measuring time use (especially for younger children). Second, the difference in answers from parents and children is an interesting concept of study in itself.

Questions to consider

Ideally, data from parents and children should be linked at the individual level. This, however, complicates the research design and (depending on the countries) calls for informed consent to be obtained from both the parents and the children, which in turn is likely to lower the response rate considerably. As a general rule the younger the children the more common it is to rely on parents or other adults as informants. This calls, of course, for some considerations on the validity and reliability of the information obtained. As a rule of thumb it is easier to obtain accurate information on behaviour (if children use the internet, for example, and for how long), but attitudes are more difficult to assess.

When children are asked to give information on their parents it is sometimes possible to cross-validate their information with comparison to other studies. An example of this is parent's occupation or educational level or parent's use of the internet.

Data collected from both parents and children can in itself be a source of rich qualitative analysis on semantic differences in "perceptions of reality". Rather than focusing on similarities, the discrepancies between children and parents might uncover an underlying cognitive gap, especially when dealing with practices related to new media and newly emerging technologies.

Another issue related to comparing data from parents and children is connected to the changing/different cultural climates the two had grown up in. For example, parents in post-communist countries (labelled as "new use-new risk") might be inclined to trivialize the gravity of internet risks, an attitude which stems from a "culture of violence" (Galtung, 1990), where ignoring their child being bothered by something online is marked by positions such as "kids are kids", "they need to learn

to fight back and stand up for themselves", while children slowly learn that it's not okay to be bothered by something online.

Pitfalls to avoid

There are some issues linked to this kind of data. The comparison between the groups can, of course, be made on the aggregate level (looking at children as a group and the parents as a group). It is, however, not safe to assume directly that differences or similarities on the aggregate level hold true on the individual level. If, for example, a study reveals that a certain proportion of children do certain things on the internet and at the same time a considerably lower proportion of parents think that their children do these particular things, this does not allow us to assume that parents do not know what their children do on the internet.

An example of the difficulty in generalizing from the aggregate level to the individual level is that if a proportion of teenagers in 34 countries who have had sexual intercourse is compared to the proportion of teenagers who have been drunk at least twice, a very weak relationship is found between the use of alcohol and the likelihood of having had sexual intercourse. In line with that, Icelandic children hold the sixth place for likelihood of having had sexual intercourse and 22nd place for the proportion of 15year-olds who have been drunk at least twice. When the same question is analysed on the individual level, however, for children in Iceland, 14% of teenagers who have never been drunk have had sexual intercourse compared to 83% of those who have been drunk 20 times or more.

Example of good practice

Examples of comparison on the aggregate level are some of the studies conducted as part of the SAFT project. In these studies, parents as a group and children as a group were surveyed separately. An example of a study where comparison is made on the individual level is UK Children go Online (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008), which, for example, examined parental regulation of children and teenagers' online activities with answers matched at the individual level.

A researcher's experience

The EU Kids Online II data for Romania revealed significant differences between children and parents' accounts of children experiencing certain internet-related risks, this difference being the biggest amongst European countries for both children's general and specific experiences (e.g. children being bothered by something on the internet or children being bullied online). Previous experience with Romanian parents reporting on their children has revealed their tendency of presenting their children as 'good kids.' Therefore, the low parental reporting of their children encountering online risks might be ascribed to both social desirability and lack of awareness. Corroboration with data from other sources (quantitative and qualitative research, internet safety reports) confirm the lack of or insufficient parental awareness of internet risks, as well as their low digital skills, which further perpetuate lack of awareness related to what children are really facing online. (Monica Barbovschi, Romania)

References and further resources

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V. REPORTING THE FINDINGS

FAQ 39: How do I report my qualitative data?

What's the issue?

In the end there is not all that much difference between reporting quantitative and qualitative data – the main issue is to present the findings of a study in such a way that those who wish to use them can understand what has been done and what the results are.

Common practice

Qualitative data analysis is often constructed around themes, and so is the reporting. To support the analysis it is common to include direct quotes from, for example, interviews.

In the final stages of qualitative data analysis data should be organized so that general themes can be formulated. It is also important to refine concepts, and to link them together in order to create a clear description or explanation of the main theme under study. The individual concepts and themes that you may have found should be put together to build an integrated explanation, which should then be interpreted in the light of the literature and the theories presented in your theoretical framework. This process will allow you to emerge with some over-arching themes that can be helpful in tying the individual pieces of your data together (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Keep in mind that representing qualitative findings as comprehensively as they deserve is challenging. In particular, in searching for the most economical examples to present, you may be tempted to choose the most vivid, striking, noticeable examples but which do not necessarily represent the typicality of the phenomenon being examined. Practical limitations may also result in the presentation of de-contextualized, fragmented data, rather than an integral part of the presentation (Livingstone & Lemish, 2001).

Finally, invite your readers to critically judge your work by cross-examining your interpretations. After all, texts are not only "freely interpreted but [are] also cooperatively generated by the addressee" (Eco, 1995: 3).

Questions to consider

Common questions that readers want qualitative reports to cover are, for example, as follows:

- Design: How were subjects selected?
- Research situation: What information was given to the participants beforehand, for example?
- Transcription: How thorough was the transcription and what instructions were given to the transcribers?
- Analysis: How was the analysis constructed? Was it based on a personal intuitive interpretation, or were some formal procedures applied?
- Verification: Which measures were taken to ensure the validity of the findings?

Pitfalls to avoid

Kvale (1996: 253–268) gives some general points for improving qualitative reports:

- Avoid boring reports. Research should always carry a story that someone might care about.
- Tiresome findings (quoting interviewees at great lengths).
- Method as a black box (insufficient information given about the research design and the methods used).
- Focusing the research and the analysis towards the final report.
- Writing for the readers – a research report should contain all the necessary information.
- Think thoroughly about possible ethical issues.
- Avoid reports that are too long. Quantity seems to be a persistent problem for qualitative researchers who seem to feel that the sheer number of pages will justify their studies not having quantitative data.

References and further resources

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FAQ 40: How do I report my quantitative data?

What's the issue?

As Robert P. Abelson (1995: 2) put it, quantitative data analysis should "make an interesting claim; it should tell a story that an informed audience will care about and it should do so by intelligent interpretation of appropriate evidence." No matter how appropriate the research design, how thorough the interviews, how proper the statistical analysis, how representative the sample, how carefully crafted the questionnaire or the questions, how stringent the quality control on the data collection process – in the end the real value of a research project depends on how it manages to communicate the results to those who can use them.

Common practice

- A research report should give a thorough overview of how the research was conducted and what the results are.
- Use graphics to display your results. A visual representation of data can reveal the meaning and implications of your study in a way that abstract numbers might conceal.
- Remember the distinction between statistical and substantive significance.
- Remember the distinction between statistical significance and effect size.
- Results should be put in context in. Do not expect numbers to speak for themselves and even though graphs and tables should be able to stand alone these should be explained in text as well.
- Keep it simple when possible. Complex statistics can lead to confusion.
- Resist the temptation to present too much raw data. Try to make a focused analysis – even if a question was put into a questionnaire, it does not necessarily have to appear in the report.

Questions to consider

As a rule of thumb any argument based on quantitative data has to contain information on five important dimensions (Abelson, 1995: 11–13):

- Magnitude: How big is the difference and how strong is the correlation?
- Articulation: What precisely is it that you have found?
- Generality: To what extent are the findings applicable to other people in other situations?
- Interestingness: How relevant are the findings and should anybody be interested?
- Credibility: Are the findings methodologically and theoretically sound?

Pitfalls to avoid

Many will undoubtedly have heard the phrase (quoted from Disraeli) that there are three kind of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics – used in the meaning that statistics can be used to confuse, distract, and even change the truth. This is, of course, true up to a point. But it is also necessary to keep in mind that it is not the statistics that lie but the researchers who consciously or unconsciously provide statistical information which is confusing, misleading, or even wrong.

Example of a project where research findings are stated clearly

The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project has conducted a series of surveys of American teens on different aspects of their internet use. In each case, they provide a clear and succinct statement of the exact sampling frame used, in order that percentages reported can be accurately interpreted. For example, on the first main page of their 2007 report on teens' use of social networking sites, and in addition to a detailed appendix on methodology, they state:

> This Pew Internet & American Life Project report is based on the findings of a nationally representative telephone survey of American teens and a parent or guardian. All numerical data were gathered through telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates between October 23, and November 19, 2006 among a sample of 935 teens ages 12–17 and a parent or guardian. For results based on the total sample, you can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is +/–3%. For results based [on] teen internet users (n = 886), the margin of sampling error is +/–4%.

Through this statement, they seek to minimize the likelihood of some common misunderstandings made when interpreting survey findings. Pew strives for further clarity by adding the following subscript to every reported table in the findings: "Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Parents and Teens Survey, October-November 2006. Based on online teens who use the internet from home. Margin of error for the overall sample is ±4%." Although it can be difficult to ensure that such information is also reported in a press release and, especially, in press reports of research findings, researchers should strive to ensure that their findings are accurately reported.

References and further resources

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FAQ 41: How shall I compare my findings with research by others?

What's the issue?

Comparative communication research is a method for achieving cross-border and expanded insights. You can draw conclusions from reaching audiences across cultures and systems. In addition, the similarities and differences between research objects within the context of the systems and cultures they are situated in help interpret the results (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004). Replication is a key element when it comes to generalization.

As technology has made communication across the globe easier and media systems have gone global, the awareness of similarities and common experiences has increased, and the claim that certain research findings are more applicable in other populations than those sampled for a particular research project.

Common practice

Research findings are always interpreted in the context of some prior knowledge or assumptions which are sometimes based on research and/or theoretical frames. A single study is never so influential that it eliminates all argument. Therefore replication is crucial. After all, if the result of a study is contrary to prior beliefs, there will most likely be strong holders of those prior beliefs who will defend their position. To facilitate comparison between studies, many researchers strive for comparability.

Comparability covers both methods and research design. This applies, for example, to sampling and measurement. Spatial and temporal comparisons are key concepts.

Questions to think about

When you consider carrying out a study which is to be comparable to previous research results, it is essential that you (a) thoroughly review previous knowledge and research at the national level, enabling you to integrate the hypotheses of older research in their own wording, so as to facilitate long-term reliable results and that you (b) also analyse international research results, so as to be able to compare and contrast your hypotheses to those in other countries, which makes a comparison at the system and country level possible, and (c) that you make sure your methodological approach in designing the research instruments and in interpreting the results is compatible with previous studies.

Pitfalls to avoid

The research world is much too full of isolated studies, yielding significant results with idiosyncratic samples under particular circumstances.

When interpreting study results and drawing conclusions for practical implementation, it is imperative to take national conditions into consideration. In practice, this means that identical results can lead to different conclusions for different countries. Even if the hypotheses completely match, the conclusions may vary. Be exact in your translations, as terminology always carries a cultural mindset.

Example of a comparative research project

An example of a successful research project is doubtlessly the EU Kids Online project. As befits a cooperative project, the questionnaire was a joint effort which led to internationally comparable results. It proved impossible, however, due to the large number of countries involved, to accommodate all country-specific questions in the poll, despite the fact that this would have yielded a more comprehensive national comparison.

References and further resources

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FAQ 42: How can I ensure my findings are not misunderstood?

What's the issue?

It is, of course, very difficult to ensure that findings are not misunderstood. There is not much danger of this happening, however, when communicating with other researchers as the scientific community has standard procedures for evaluating research findings. The aim of scientific reporting is to inform other researchers and the general public of the research findings and also of their trustworthiness. It is first and foremost when communicating results to the general public that things may go wrong.

Common practice

It has perhaps never been so easy to publish material both in print and electronic form, but at the same time it is increasingly difficult to be heard in the ever growing chorus calling for attention in the public sphere (McNair, 2006). It is, however, possible to take various steps to improve the likelihood that your messages are heard and also that what you say is not misinterpreted. If a report is made, some basic rules of thumb apply:

- Try to be clear and concise when presenting results – do not leave it to readers to draw their own conclusions.
- Remember that numbers do not speak for themselves – try to put things into perspective as much as possible.
- Try to avoid technical terms when writing summaries and main conclusions.
- Use graphics, if possible.

Questions to consider

When communicating with the news media the following should also be kept in mind:

- Who is the audience for the report? Academic, researchers, non-governmental organizations, children, parents.... Depending on the target audience, the idiom will differ.
- Ask yourself what is newsworthy about the findings and how is it possible to connect the findings to the wider social context. By sharpening the focus of the story before contacting the media you increase the likelihood that it will be reported at all, and also that it will be reported in the way that you want it to be.
- Ask yourself who is likely to be interested in the findings and why. This will enable you to focus the findings more directly at the target group.
- Choose the appropriate media for the findings you wish to present. Once it has been established what the message is and to whom it should be directed, the next issue is who should deliver it. Television is different from a broadsheet paper, which in turn is different from a tabloid paper, and so on.
- Consider the practices at the media outlet and plan when to contact the reporters or editors so that they will have the time to get to know your story without being under too much pressure from their next deadline.
- Provide reporters with a written memo or press release containing the most important information. Such a memo needs to clarify the main points and begin with the most outstanding ones.
- Provide the media with access to a contact person who can give further information or participate in an interview. Also provide a quotation in the memo so that the reporter does not need to gather everything from scratch.

Pitfalls to avoid

When giving interviews to the media try to focus on the main points and remember that journalists need a headline, so try to provide one (otherwise journalists will have to find one themselves).

A distinction is often made between pure and applied research. This distinction is, in many ways, misleading, particularly in the case of research with a focus on children and their experiences on the internet. Researchers are thus advised that their research results, no matter how theoretically pure they are intended to be, could be used as a basis for decision making or policy development.

Example of a project with findings that could be misrepresented

The University of New Hampshire findings on children's exposure to online risk have been sufficiently misrepresented for them to issue a statement to the press outlining both good reporting of complex statistics and poor reporting, following a 'Do say' and 'Don't say' format. Headed 'Internet Safety Education for Teens: Getting It Right', they note that 'A growing number of people are promoting Internet safety education in an effort to help keep youngsters safe from Internet sex offenders. But some of the information in their lectures, pamphlets, videos, and web sites does not reflect what researchers have learned about the important features of these crimes. Here are suggestions of how to make Internet safety education materials more consistent with current research.' (www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/Internet%20Factsheet_portrait%20version_2-6-08_khf.pdf)

References and further resources

For examples of newsletters and short reports see: www.eukidsonline.net

McNair, B. (2006) Cultural Chaos: Journalism and Power in a Globalised World. New York, Routledge.

FAQ 43: Should I give feedback on the findings to my interviewees?

What's the issue?

It is essential to show respect for those who participate in research projects. This applies not only to interviewees but also to people who participate indirectly such as parents and teachers. In all cases it is important to show all individuals who participate in a research project that their contribution is valued. Feedback on the findings is one part of this.

Common practice

When a study has been conducted and the results are ready, it is good practice to let those who contributed in some way know that the results are out and where they can be found. For example, if a school has provided access to its students, the headteacher should receive a thank you letter and a copy of the research report.

As a general rule, the more you ask of participants, the more you have to show them that you value their contribution. In line with that it is more common to see researchers seek feedback or approval from interviewees in qualitative research, but relatively uncommon in quantitative research.

In qualitative studies it is good practice to ask for feedback from individuals that is quoted directly in a research report, and individuals should not be quoted by name unless they have given their permission.

Questions to consider

A general issue in all research is the use of incentives when participants receive gifts or money in return for their contribution. Seeking feedback or comments from the interviewees is also a request for additional work on their behalf.

A special issue when conducting research on children is that research findings are inevitably adult interpretations of the reality of children. In that respect it can be very relevant to seek feedback from children on the research findings, but then again, scientific work often uses language and concepts that might be difficult for children to understand.

If it is decided to seek feedback from interviewees it is worth thinking carefully about the process as it may sometimes be difficult to get feedback without letting others (parents or teachers) see the interviewees' answers. For example, a letter addressed to a teenager might be opened by a parent.

Pitfalls to avoid

When asking for feedback from interviewees it is important to think the process through so that it is done within a clear frame:

- What kind of feedback is wanted?
- What is to be done with the feedback?
- Will the research results be changed if the interviewees think that the interpretation is misleading or incorrect?
- Will changes be made if an interviewee is unhappy with an anonymous quote and wants it to be dropped even if it is exactly what he or she said?

Example of a project where findings are made available

It is common in surveys to administer questionnaires in schools but many schools have become reluctant to grant access to researchers as it often requires a lot of work on behalf of the schools to administer the questionnaires. Therefore it is important that the teachers and headteachers can see that their efforts lead to meaningful results. This has encouraged some researchers to send the schools summary reports of the findings and to make findings

available online. The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) has not only made findings available in reports, but has also on the website it's 'key result generator' which provides an opportunity to customize graphs using ESPAD data. Visitors to the project website can explore eight key variables by country, gender, and year. (www.espad.org/en/Keyresult-Generator)

References and further resources

ESPAD: www.espad.org

European Social Survey: www.europeansocialsurvey.org

ANNEX 1: EU KIDS ONLINE

Overview

In its first phase (2006-9), as a thematic network of 21 countries, EU Kids Online identified and critically evaluated the findings of nearly 400 research studies, drawing substantive, methodological and policy-relevant conclusions. In its second phase (2009-11), as a knowledge enhancement project across 25 countries, the network surveyed children and parents to produce original, rigorous data on their internet use, risk experiences and safety mediation. In its third phase (2011-14), the EU Kids Online network is examining findings and critical analyses of internet and mobile technology uses and associated risks among children across Europe, drawing on these to sustain an active dialogue with stakeholders about priority areas of concern for child online safety.

Thus, the network has widened its work by including all member states and extending its engagement – both proactively and responsively - with policy stakeholders and internet safety initiatives. It has also deepened its work through targeted hypothesis testing of the pan-European dataset, focused on strengthening insights into the risk environment and strategies of safety mediation, by pilot testing innovative research methodologies for the nature, meaning and consequences of children's online risk experiences, and conducting longitudinal comparisons of findings where available over time.

Last, it is updating its work on the online database of available findings, and by producing timely updates on the latest knowledge about new and emerging issues (for example, social networking, mobile platforms, privacy, personal data protection, safety and awareness-raising practices in schools, digital literacy and citizenship, geo-location services, and so forth).

Work packages

WP1: Project management and evaluation

WP2: European evidence base

WP3: Hypotheses and comparisons

WP4: Exploring children's understanding of risk

WP5: Dissemination of project results

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