Questionnaires Respondents' Data Falsification Case of Third-Year Students of English at Batna2 University

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Abstract:

Many factors may stand as impediments against the progression of any scientific research. As surveys tend to represent a large portion of researches, success and advancement of researches are highly conditioned by the questionnaires' validity and reliability. This paper investigates the extent to which research respondents are likely to be candid and truthful in reporting their answers, and the causes that impede them from so being. It also suggests recommendations for researchers to increase chances for obtaining more trustworthy data. The results obtained confirm the hypothesis putting forward respondents do not always give true answers in surveys and questionnaires, do not always respond honestly and seriously, and that inattention, lack of motivation and interest, communication language barriers, less cognitive abilities; are factors bringing about this phenomenon.

Keywords: Research Questionnaires/Surveys, Research Respondents 'Inattention and Untruthfulness, Inaccurate/Wrong Data, Batna 2 University Students of English.

1. INTRODUCTION

Scientific research is an active resource of innovation as well as knowledge development. There are a number of obstacles which would undermine the validity of scientific research. As a large part of research relies on questionnaires and surveys (mainly in social and human sciences), the accuracy of information reported in surveys has always been under general question (Fledman and Lynch, 1988; Schwarz, 1999). Survey inattentive or false responding lays substantial empirical evidence. Many tend to untrust and even reproach researchers/interviewers for falsified and fabricated data; failing to direct the finger of blame towards research respondents/interviewees as data falsifiers. Respondents' errors, confusions, inattention and careless responding, along with satisficing behavior (i.e. giving answers that they think will satisfy the researchers rather than giving accurate true answers) lead to data falsification. Data falsification has gained the interest of scholars and researchers since 1945 with a study conducted by Crepsi who argued that withdrawal from questionnaires/surveys' conventions is a problem of morale and morality (431). This study attempts to determine the extent of survey validity and survey responding attention. Falsification and fabrication of data are a growing threat to data integrity and quality, and thus, of credibility of surveys and potentially damaging the results and conclusions of any study.

1.2. Research Problem: Data falsification and fabrication is an issue that does not concern only researchers or survey designers but also research questionnaire participants. Respondents are also blameworthy of inauthentic results of scientific/academic studies, as they provide falsified answers –both consciously and unconsciously-- in different surveys. What causes data falsification and how to prevent it stand as a rather moot subject that requires much debate.

1.3. Research Questions: The present study has been founded on approaching a number of questions which designs its overall layout:-Do respondents always give true responses? Why do they provide false answers?

Do they read instructions? Do they read all the questions? Do they answer all the questions? How could we prevent research survey/questionnaire data falsifiability?

1.4. Hypotheses: -Respondents do not always give true answers in surveys and questionnaires; do not always read all the questions and instructions. Inattention, lack of motivation and interest, communication language barriers, less cognitive abilities, and lack of seriousness; are factors bringing about this phenomenon.

1.5. Methodology: The use of a descriptive exploratory research methodology has been followed, through which a questionnaire has been administered to investigate participants' honesty and seriousness --or else— falsification and unreliability in responding questionnaires, along with the causes resulting in their being either.

1.6. Population/Sampling: Third year students of English at Batna 2 University (of the university year 2021-2022) have been opted for the present research. The research population has been selected due to its being the usual target sample of Batna 2 University Master and Doctorate students of English for their academic researches, the aim of which is to help get more reliable and valid academic research. Sixty (60) students have been randomly sampled to afford the research units.

Objectives: The present study is conducted to serve a number of objectives:

1- To investigate the extent to which research respondents are likely to be candid and truthful in reporting their answers,

2- Identify the causes that impede them from so being.

3- Suggest recommendations for researchers to increase chances for obtaining more trustworthy data for their studies.

2. Literature Review

Different reasons may cause non-response (refusal, non-contact, vacant dwelling (in case of household surveys) and absenteeism). Non-

response can be either a product of noncontact with the selected target (participants) or of their refusal to participate (either fully or partially). Non-response has two main negative effects on the statistical results, sample size reduction, and bias of estimates. Leaving gaps in surveys' answers will cause the sample size to be reduced from that sought at the beginning; this would logically contribute to injustice and prejudice as far as estimates and conclusions are concerned. Respondents' bias and non-response are issues where the participants are unable or unwilling to answer questions truthfully. Kasirye (2012:4) defines them as a situation where participants misrepresent the truth in their responses through either deliberate or unconscious falsification. Non-response does not mean only full-refusal or complete inability of respondents to answer the whole questionnaire. Some respondents accept answering the questionnaire, but refuse to/or cannot answer some questions; the fact that results in response under-coverage (decreasing the size of the sample). Compulsory participation may be applied –in some cases like schools and so on—but still cooperation is rather advised, as Cornish puts forward "refusals are best handled by having supervisors and/or staff following respondents up" (3). Bad consequences will be on the scientific integrity of the data. Skipping questions will have a bad effect on the overall data quality (by decreasing the results statistics and affecting the survey estimates).

Many factors may affect survey response according to Cornish (2002): the quality of surveys frame (population coverage); method of data collection (mails, interviews...), time of year, questionnaire design and layout, communication strategy, follow-up, cultural backgrounds of respondents, the language of the questionnaire, prior respondents' experience with similar surveys, protection of confidentiality of information provided, and use of incentives. Researchers have also to take into regard participants' comfort, they should ease their load as respondents "to maintain an adequate response level, researchers have also to minimize the total load placed on respondents" (Cornish, 2002, 3). Good management

helps achieve and maintain an adequate response level and decrease non-response. There are other very important steps researchers have to consider in their surveys. The selected respondents (the study sample) have to be notified beforehand of the purpose of their selection, the purpose and value of the survey, what their task is supposed to be, their importance and significance to the study, in addition to any useful information that would help gain the respondents' trust and approval and facilitate establishing contact with them.

A rather effective way to increase response rate is Follow-up respondents, mainly if the target sample is area-based /address-defined one. Research agents (participants/respondents or researchers) misreport facts in surveys. Respondents –for instance—negatively answer (answering by no) filter questions so as to avoid a long list of follow-up questions that a positive answer (answering by yes) may entail. Data falsification varies according to the number of respondents giving false information and the number of false answers one respondent may provide. "Results may depend on the number of liars and the number of times they lie" Chesney and Penny (2013: 1). Chesney and Penny (2013) presented an example illustrating respondents feign/invent data. "So, here, if the 27-year-old male feels that most respondents will be 18 years old (as might be the case if for instance undergraduate students are completing the survey), he will invent data in line with this" (3). In the same vein, a white respondent may feign his attitudes towards the blacks if he knows that the researcher and/or other respondents are all blacks; or a non-Muslim may falsify his data/attitudes if the researcher and/or participants are all Muslims. Most respondents may go through satisficing rather than optimizing responding strategy; i.e. trying to provide a satisfactory response rather than an optimal one; one which lead to less reliable data. Respondents may adapt their answers to the interviewer's/researcher's characteristics. They may be "more positive

about emancipation to female interviewers, less racist to black interviewers, less alcohol use and more religious behavior from Muslim respondents reported to Muslim interviewers" (Stoop et al., 2018: 10). It is also worth mentioning that non-response or false data are much more given by web respondents than others; a fact asserted by Christian, et al. (2008) among many others. De Leeuwu (2005) asserts that when the researcher is present –in person or by phone—he/she receives more socially desirable responses from his participants. Naquina et al. (2010) argue that survey participants tend to lie more in an email than when responding by writing on paper. In a study guided by Johnson (2005), he declares that online surveys bear more likeliness of respondents' inattention than paper surveys.

Galesic et al. (2008) put forward that in order to get a valid, reliable and rational questionnaire data, respondents have to concentrate, think and communicate; this is because cognitive efforts are usually needed for completing a questionnaire/survey. Topic interest and knowledge also greatly affect respondents' attention and thus the reliability of their responses. Besides, long surveys cause what Galesic and Bosnjak (2009) refer to as respondents' fatigue, which would –in turn—lead to fast, less-discriminatory responses for later questions; the fact that will negatively affect/decrease the quality of the survey data. In the same vein, many other scholars like Galesic et al. (2008) claim that respondents reveal more readiness to actively answer questions from the first half of a list. In contrast, Lenzner et al. (2011) argue that respondents are more likely to show virtual attention to specific areas of surveys (mainly difficult, imprecise, uncommon words or negatively phrased questions).

The sample selected for a given study is also of no less significant importance; researchers have to minutely study, and thoroughly and deliberately well-choose the most appropriate population/sample which would best serve their studies. —If interviewers purposefully concentrate their efforts on easy-to-get respondents than on hard-to-get sample units, they may reinforce non-response bias. This will also result in

a high rate of satisficing and more "Don't Knows' as a result" (ibid 10). In fact, the use of "Don't Know filter" increases responses' reliability, it, however, discourages respondents to report their true opinions and attitudes (Borgers and Hox, 2000: 15). Otherwise, supplying a list of answer options is advised, as Borgers and Hox (2000) claim "the more response options offered, the higher the reliability of responses" (15).

Some participants do not provide authentic answers because they simply do not know the right answers, and this is for their being novices/ inexperienced or uninformed respondents. "The less cognitively sophisticated respondents are the more sensitive to difficult or cognitively demanding questions they will be" (Brosnan et al. 2019: 3). According to Alwin and Krosnick (1991); Schwarz et al. (1998) among many others, reduction in cognitive functioning is highly associated with a decline in the reliability of responses. As a result of their uninvolvedness in the topic of the survey/or questions context, respondents may give wrong answers. Besides, questions with complex instructions require more reading skills than other questions. Certainly, respondents will not afford efforts to consult a dictionary to check the meaning of a complex word to respond to a questionnaire. People, hence, resort to the most satisfying answers, for they require the least effort.

Problems concerning response quality occur in accordance with respondents' honesty and feelings of responsibility, too. Survey's reliability relies heavily on the honesty of respondents, mainly if the contact between researchers and respondents is only electronic (i.e. online/internet-based surveys) (Rogers and Richarme, 2016). Vésteindottir et al. (2018) assert that ―over a quarter of Internet survey participants do not read survey instructions, and therefore, instead of asking respondents to answer honestly, they were asked whether they responded honestly ‖ (1). Providing honest/accurate answers lessens data vulnerability and improves data

quality. To achieve this, face-to-face surveys are recommended. ―Face-to-face surveys are often seen as the gold standard in survey research... response rates are higher than in other modes ‖ (Stoop et al., 2018: 3). Whereas, Simmons et al (2016) contend that all survey data, regardless of on which mode of data collection they are based, are susceptible to survey error. Many respondents prove faulty as they either straight-line or speed throughout a questionnaire answering. Straight lining frequently occurs in surveys when respondents give identical (or nearly identical) answers using the same response scale.

There are other survey error types (according to Biewer and Lyking 2003); sampling error (in case of selecting a non-representative sample); survey scope error (occurs when a questionnaire fails to cover all the important aspects of the topic under study); response refusal error (if participants refuse to respond, this will result in a non-generalisable result); non-responses error (this occurs when a respondent fails to answer all the survey questions whether intentionally or not, affecting --by that-- the general outcome of a research); unnecessary survey items (this will lengthen the questionnaire which will affect participants willingness to answer it); and response bias (respondents may be influenced to answer in a certain way).

According to nsfconsulting Blog (2022), there are four (4) reasons why people refuse to

/unfaithfully answer a questionnaire

1- Most respondents refuse to make a lot of effort to give information; they may do so if provided with an incentive. They generally prefer to be provided with a list of exhibition while they can tick the applicable choices –as this requires less effort-- than to think for their own answers.

2- Respondents also do not show any readiness/enthusiasm to respond to questions that they consider inconvenient or inaptly to the survey context.

3- Questions, that do not serve a legitimate purpose, do not generally gain respondents' eagerness to answer, or divulge information.

4- Any question that may threaten one's self-image or demand sensitive information may cause reticence from the part of survey respondents. In some cases, as during personal interviews, respondents may feel pressed to provide responses, and hence, give biased information. Many questions can be regarded as too sensitive by participants, especially those related to topics that are defined as too personal/intimate like:

－money, religion, family life, sexual orientation and involvement in accidents or crimes, among many others ‖ .

Researchers –in some sense—are also responsible for their questionnaire/survey data's reliability, for the type of questions and quality of survey design they ask/use. They have, hence, to focus on a number of questioning characteristics to avoid data and thus survey invalidity. They have to consider things like the length of the introductory text, readability, ambiguity, offering double-barreled questions, Don't Know filter, avoiding too personal or threatening questions, complex instructions, and negatively formulated questions. Researchers have to be aware of key survey quality issues and can –therefore-- follow different tips to win their respondents' willingness to seriously and honestly answer all their questions:

-To precede asking questions with a motivating statement introducing the question as one of much more general interest. Ensure asking questions using the third-person technique, and not directly target the respondent; this would help alleviate any stress or mistrust, and would rather provide them with some degree of freedom. Sensitive questions, if there are any, have better to be placed at the end of questionnaires; at this stage of survey responding, respondents will have overcome mistrust and therefore will have been more willing to give true information. provide participants with response categories, rather than asking them to brainstorm for specific figures (to give limited response options and ensure to leave space for any other suggestion that has not been mentioned on the list of

options). Avoid phrasing questions unclearly, and any complex language. Researchers have to give access to questionnaires in every language that the selected sample may understand.

3. Research Procedure/Findings

Table1: Participants' Age

Options	Number of participants
From 20 to 23	56 (93%)
From 23 to 26	03(5%)
Over 26 years old	01(1,66%)

According to the data provided by the table above –and as expected as the sample units are third year University students, the age generally ranges between 20 and 23 years old.

Table2: Participants' Sex

Gender	
Male	18 (30%)
Female	42 (70%)

As the data reveal, the participants were randomly chosen, having –by that- 30 % of male and 70 % of female respondents answering going through the survey questions.

Table 3: Participants' Experience in Survey Answering

Options	Number of participants
Yes	47 (78.33%)
No	13(21.66%)

From the information displayed above, one may infer that most participants (78.33%) are familiar with questionnaires and surveys' responding. Only (21.66%) claim that they have never experienced questionnaires' answering.

Table4: Participants' Readiness to Taking Parts in Surveys

Options	Number of participants
Yes	41(68.33%)
No	19(31.66%)

The table clearly shows that the respondents do not show any clear objection to serve as questionnaires' informants, as we obtained (68.33 %) of the informants who like responding to questionnaires while (31.66 %) seem to dislike this task accomplishment.

Table 5: Participants' Seriousness in Survey Answering

Options	Number of participants
Yes	57(95%)
No	03(5%)

The results obtained indicate that the great majority (95%) state that they sincerely consider questionnaires and they are conscious of their being serious tools of research.

Table 6: Participants' Attention to Instructions

Options	Number of participants
Yes	54(90%)
No	06(10%)

When inquired whether they read instructions before answering questions, most informants (90%) positively replied.

Table 07: Participants' Attention to All Survey Questions

Options	Number of participants
Yes	52(86.66%)
No	08(13.33%)

Students were also asked to report whether or not they read all the questions in a survey. Most of them (86.66%) ensure that they do; the fact which demonstrates that they do not prove as passive informants.

Table 08: Participants' Non-Response

Options	Number of participants

Yes	28(46.66%)
No	32(53.33%)

Table 08 does not reflect a great gap in the statistics gathered from students' positive and negative responses to investigate the rate of participants' non-responses in questionnaires. (46%) of student informants providing a 'yes' answer facing (53.33%) of students responding with 'no'.

-Students were also asked why they leave non-responded questions; they were thus given a range of possible answers to choose one (s) that is more appropriate for them

1-Because you don't feel interested/concerned

2- Because you don't understand the instruction/the question

3-Because you don't know the answer

4- Because the survey is long, and you feel bored

5- Because you don't understand the language

Table09: Participants' Reasons for Leaving Non-Response

Options	Number of participants
1-Because you don't feel interested/concerned	5(8.33%)
2-Because you don't understand the instruction/the question	8(13.33%)
3-Because you don't know the answer	11(18.33%)
4- Because the survey is long, and you feel bored	9(15%)
5- Because you don't understand the language	2(3.33%)

The findings reveal that the reasons of participants' non-response in questionnaires vary from lack of interest, lack of knowledge, the instruction/question unclearness, boredom (caused by lengthy

questionnaires), language barriers; with the later taking the least percentage (3.33%).

Table10: Participants' Types of Survey Preferences

Options	Number of participants
more explanatory instructions/questions	13(21.66%)
direct short instructions/questions	47(78.33%)

One of the most distinguishing of the present survey questions is Question 09, through which students were asked to determine which type of surveys they prefer, one with lengthy and more detail-giving instructions or short ones. The responses have equally been distinguishing as (78.83%) claim their preferences of direct/short instructions and questions. Only (21.66 %) of student participants argue that they need more explanatory instructions and questions to respond to questionnaires.

Table 11: Online/ Paper Survey Preferences among Respondents

Options	Number of participants
On-Line Surveys	32(53.33%)
Off-Line/Paper Surveys	28(46.66%)

This question was integrated in the present study to investigate students' preference of online, or else, off-line surveys. The results reveal that around the half of the respondents (53.33%) prefer on-line surveys, while the half other prefers off-line/paper surveys. This gives the impression that the survey mode does not actually gain much of respondents' interests, and therefore, does not affect data reliability either.

Table 12: Respondents' Opinion of the Necessity of Participants' Incentives

Options	Number of participants
Yes	43(71.66%)
No	17(28.33%)

In order to figure out their opinions of the use of incentives (be they financial or others), the informant students were offered a double-barreled question, without providing any options or asking for any justifications for their responses; the aim of which is to alleviate any stress or mistrust that may arise by the present request. The majority of participants (71.66%) see that incentive are highly recommended for obtaining a valid and a better response-level

Table13: Participants' Suggestions to avoid Falsified and Unreliable Response in Surveys

Options	Number of participants
1- provide the questionnaire in different languages that the respondent may understand	20(33.33%)
2- avoid long questionnaires/long questions and instructions	34(56.66%)
3- offer clear and readable questions	25(41.66%)
4- offer different options for answering questions	24(40%)
5- Any other suggestion.....	-Don't limit respondents by suggested options -Add "may be" next to the options yes/no

The informants were asked to answer the following questions:

-What do you suggest to avoid non-response or falsified unreliable responses (you can have more than one option)?

1-provide the questionnaire in different languages that the respondent may understand

2- avoid long questionnaires/long questions and instructions

3- offer clear and readable questions

4- offer different options for answering questions

5-Any other suggestion.....

Table12 reports students' suggestion of different solutions to decrease surveys' data falsification, to achieve surveys and questionnaires' reliability and validity. Given a list of options to choose from, participants' first choice goes to avoiding long questionnaire (long questions and instructions) (56.66%). (41.66%) of informants see that offering participants clear and readable questions brings about more valid responses; (40%) vote for offering different options for answering questions. Only (33.33%) claim for providing same questionnaires in different language versions to give respondents more opportunities to better understand them.

4. Discussion

The questionnaire findings indicate the likelihood of respondents' data falsification occurrence while responding to questionnaires. Most participants have prior experience in questionnaire answering, and hence the results obtained from the present questionnaire reflect their authentic involvement in the raised issue. Although most of them do not object to questionnaires' responding, a considerable number of the participants dislike this task which they think is out of their concern. Questionnaires' instructions, too, do not seem to present a counter-desire for students. Although students read all the questions in surveys, they leave non-response for different reasons. Most participants leave questions unanswered either because they do not know the right answer or for they do not understand the instruction or the question itself. Others do not answer all the questions of

questionnaires because they do not feel concerned, do not understand the language or feel boredom as the survey/questionnaire may sometimes be long. The majority of the participants prefer short instructions and direct questions. Practically, students do not hold different attitudes towards the modes of questionnaires (online/offline or paper surveys). As far as incentives are concerned, most respondents believe that they are of great importance if one wishes to get more adequate responses by their participants. The results also show that respondents mostly agree on all the suggested remedial issues for non-response and/or falsified responses. The most favourable remedy has been that of avoiding lengthy questionnaires, long questions and instructions. The participants also show positive attitudes towards offering readable /easy to grasp questions along with offering different options for question answering. Others believe that the best way to avoid falsified unreliable answers in surveys is to provide questionnaires in different languages to give participants more opportunity to fully understand instructions and questions alike. Students' own suggested solution has been mainly to use 'may be' or 'sometimes' in addition to yes and no options.

5. CONCLUSION

The present research probed into the likelihood of respondents' being candid and truthful --or else—inattentive, not serious and dishonest in reporting their own responses in surveys and questionnaires dedicated to pure academic/scientific research. It also attempted to investigate the different reasons behind the occurrence of such phenomenon, which once determined, will help us devote part of the study to offer recommendations to fight this rather negative issue.

The findings reveal that not all people like participating in questionnaires' responding, and thus, researchers have to first politely invite (ask permission from) and incentivize their respondents (at least by a motivating introductory statement) to gain their consent and their truthfulness. Many respondents give false answers and/or leave non-

responded questions because they mainly do not understand the questions, do not know how to answer them, and because they dislike long questionnaires. Therefore, and so as to obtain more reliable and valid results, researchers/questionnaire designers have to abide by a grid of instructions as; (1) to avoid long questionnaires, questions and instructions; (2) offer clearer and more readable questions;
(3) offer more options for respondents to select from; and (4) provide translated versions of questionnaires, in languages that their respondents are likely to understand.

In conclusion, the results obtained by the present study may not be far from being an artifact, as well; though the author/researcher attempts hard to apply all the recommendations, and to carefully make questions clear, non-complex, short and readable to the respondents.

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