

Conducting survey research: Part 1: Use of instruments and permissions: What you need to know

Many researchers seek to publish work that uses questionnaires and surveys. The apparent simplicity of this approach to gathering data makes it popular in nursing and health sciences research. Complexities in the use of surveys and questionnaires and the legal and ethical principles that frame their use are often overlooked, resulting in disappointment for authors who seem unaware of the responsibilities editors and reviewers have in relation to these data collection instruments.

This is the first of two editorials designed to answer commonly asked questions and optimize the chances that you can get your study published. The first of these editorials focuses on permission to use instruments that are already developed, and the second explores considerations in using surveys and questionnaires as a means to collect and analyze information.

Although there are sound reasons for using preexisting psychometrically tested questionnaires, including potentially enhanced validity, efficiency in instrument design, and potential for greater breadth of exploration of a concept in multiple studies (Hyman, Lamb, & Bulmer, 2006), there are also a number of risks. An increasingly common risk for those seeking to publish their work is that unless all permissions are gained, their work cannot be published.

1 | SURVEY RESEARCH PART 1: USE OF INSTRUMENTS AND PERMISSIONS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

1.1 | Do I need permission to use a questionnaire or survey instrument?

Most instruments, surveys, scales, and questionnaires are *not* openly available and are copyrighted by an individual or organization. The trap that many researchers fall into is to assume that because they found a full copy of the instrument online that they can automatically use it – this is not the case! Similarly, you cannot use part of a questionnaire without permission.

If you are submitting to *Nursing & Health Sciences*, we ask you to supply evidence that you have permission from the copyright holder to use and translate copyrighted instruments or software used in your research. This proof can be in the form of an email but should be in English. If no permission was required (e.g., instruments or measures are freely available), you need to provide the reference/link detailing this and record this on your cover letter. In your manuscript, you also need to record that permission has been received from the copyright

holder to use and translate copyrighted instruments or software used in the research or that the instruments you used were freely available.

1.2 | Can you give me an example?

The Automated Self-Administered 24-Hour (ASA24[®]) Dietary Assessment Tool <https://epi.grants.cancer.gov/asa24/> is an example of an instrument that is freely available for use by researchers. This is clearly stipulated on the instructions. However, if researchers need to adapt the instrument, this has to be conducted in conjunction with the developers.

An example of an instrument that is copyrighted is the World Health Organization's Quality of Life measure, the WHOQOL. <https://www.who.int/healthinfo/survey/whoqol-qualityoflife/en/index2.html>. Potential users of this questionnaire are advised to contact the local center for permissions and other support.

1.3 | Does copyright law apply to survey and questionnaires?

The short answer is yes! It is good practice to assume that everything is copyrighted. It is your legal and ethical responsibility to obtain permission to use, modify, and/or reproduce an instrument (University of Houston, 2019). Similarly, using single items from questionnaires without permission may constitute copyright infringement and/or plagiarism.

Copyright protections apply to both printed and digital material, and copyright holders can stipulate standards for the use of their research materials (PsychData, 2019). There may be a fee for use and for how the measure is used. For example, there may be stipulations about how the instrument is administered, the training required, and the type of populations that are suitable. Many of these restrictions serve to preserve the integrity, validity, and reliability of the research process. Some instruments are distributed under a license agreement or terms of use, and users must agree to these terms to use the instrument (University of Houston, 2019).

Only the copyright owner of the original instrument can authorize a translation, and it is the translator's responsibility to ensure that the translation is faithful to the original—if “the translation is not true to the original, or alters or modifies its very sense, it will constitute a violation of a moral right of the author of the original” (Anfray et al., 2018).

Some instruments are available under a Creative Commons Attribution license. Creative Commons is a global nonprofit organization that enables sharing and reuse of knowledge through the provision of free legal tools. The web page is available in many languages and explains the license: <https://creativecommons.org/about/>

Translators can also be protected by copyright laws; if you use a translated instrument, you will need permission from the original author as well as the author of the translated version. If a complete instrument has been published in whole in a journal or book, the publisher may be the copyright holder (Spurlock D Jr., 2019).

1.4 | What happens if I have used a questionnaire without permission?

Research costs a great deal in time and resources for both researchers and participants. If the researcher has not had permission to use an instrument, this effort is wasted and there may be consequences for the research and researcher. We do not want this to happen to you.

It is unlikely that a reputable journal will publish your research unless you can show that you had the appropriate permissions. However, if your research is published and the lack of permission is detected, then your paper may be subject to retraction. Retraction because of an error such as this is not good for the reputation of the researcher, their academic institution, or the journal. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE <https://publicationethics.org>) has had cases referred to them about several aspects of the use of instruments including the unauthorized use or use without research ethics permission or consent. The worst-case scenario involves legal threats and a large fee: The developers of the *Morisky Medication Adherence Scale-8 (MMAS-8)* scale allegedly trawl the literature to detect unauthorized use of their scale and ask those who have used the scale to pay for a retroactive license, which may cost thousands or tens of thousands of dollars (Stern, 2017).

1.5 | How should I seek permission?

This process may take some time, and you need to apply for permission as early in the research process as you can. Ensure that you have carefully assessed the suitability of the instrument and there is ample evidence of it having documented reliability and validity. There may be special requirements for seeking permission, and you need to follow these requirements carefully to maximize the chances of receiving a timely reply. If there is no specific form to complete you can adapt the template in figure 1, adapted from the University of Houston (2019). [File S1]. Keep a record of permissions granted, and it is good practice to send your published work to the scale developer. Publishers often have an online request form for researchers to submit a request for permission to use an instrument; alternatively, you can email the publisher to request permission (Spurlock D Jr., 2019).

1.6 | What do I do if authors do not respond?

It can be difficult to ascertain the current ownership of survey instruments as Hays, Weech-Maldonado, Teresi, Wallace, and Stewart (2018) demonstrate using the example of the Mini Mental State Examination (MMSE). Nevertheless, authors will bear any cost of not ensuring they have appropriate permission to use instruments.

One of the main problems is contacting the original authors of the instrument. A recent study found that nearly one-in-five email addresses in the MEDLINE literature database were invalid (Perkel, 2019). If you cannot get a reply from the author and a simple Google search fails to locate the author, search for them on their institution's website or try to locate them on networking sites such as LinkedIn, ResearchGate, or Academia. If all of these strategies fail, then you may consider use of the instrument under the Fair Use Exception to US copyright law, but this decision should be made in collaboration with an authoritative source on copyright, frequently an experienced college or university librarian who provides copyright services to the institution (Spurlock D Jr., 2019).

1.7 | Where can I find a repository of instruments I can use?

Please note that most instruments you locate via these portals are not openly available and you will have to seek permission as described here earlier (Sigma Theta Tau International, 2019).

The Virginia Henderson Global Nursing e-Repository: Resources for measurements and tools used in nursing research and practice.

<https://www.nursingrepository.org/tools-instruments-tools-measurements/>

The University of Vermont: Research Instruments: Surveys, Questionnaires, and other Measurement Tools: Descriptions and Search Tips.

<http://researchguides.uvm.edu/researchinstruments>

Australian Centre on Quality of Life: Measures.

<http://www.acqol.com.au/instruments>

Measurement Instrument Database for the Social Sciences (MIDSS).

<http://www.midss.org>

2 | CONCLUSION

In this editorial we have outlined the steps required to use and adapt existing instruments in an ethically and legally appropriate manner. The importance of following research reporting guidelines such as the EQUATOR guidelines <http://www.equator-network.org> and *Nursing & Health Sciences'* author guidelines [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1442-2018/homepage/ForAuthors.html](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1442-2018/homepage/ForAuthors.html) cannot be overstressed.

Our companion editorial on how to conduct survey research will explore considerations in using surveys and questionnaires as a means to collect and analyse information and will be published in the next issue of *Nursing & Health Sciences*.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.