

A guide on

How to use research methods to understand emotional decision making.

Introduction.

Emotions are a crucial component in every aspect of our lives, but particularly when it comes to behaviour and decision-making. Our guide will help you to understand what emotions are, why they are important, and what research methods can be used to help understand emotional decision making.

What do we mean by 'emotions' and why are they important?

Firstly, let's address what we mean by 'emotions.' In psychology, emotion is often defined as **"a complex state of feeling that results in physical and psychological changes that influence thought and behaviour."** Scientific research is providing us with a better understanding of emotions, showing us that feelings (which are the deeper, lower level components of emotions)

are: **“biochemical mechanisms we use in order to quickly calculate probabilities of survival and reproduction. Feelings ... are based on calculation.”**¹ Feelings, as it turns out, are a method of making calculations to help us when faced with decision making.

Emotions underpin, and in many instances determine, what course of action we'll take (the decision-making process), and are the motivation for pursuing particular courses of action (behaviours). Therefore, it is important to uncover and explore emotions to understand their place in decision making and behaviour change. Using research methods to uncover and analyse emotions related to our decision making will ensure any insights and recommendations put forward are both relevant and will link into emotional decision making, leading to behaviour change once implemented.

What research methods help us to uncover and understand emotions?

A range of research methods can be used to help uncover, explore, and understand a person's emotions in relation to a given topic or issue.



Questions

Perhaps the most common (and easiest) way to elicit someone's emotions is to ask them. This questioning technique can be as straight forward as simply asking: "How does attending the service make you feel?" or "What are your feelings about attending the service?".

This questioning technique is best used in-person, via telephone interviews, or in focus groups, where you can have set questions ready to explore emotions. Based on a participant's responses, you can probe further into their emotions with additional follow up questions, such as: "You said that your experience at the service made you feel angry, what was it in particular that made you feel angry?".

However, it should be noted that there can also be immense value in using this questioning technique to explore emotions through surveys (either paper or online).

While you as the researcher may not be able to explore emotions in a personal manner, using surveys provides participants with the opportunity to share their emotions in an anonymous setting (where there is no direct contact with the researcher) and enable them to be more open and honest than they perhaps would otherwise.



Scenarios & stories

Another technique you can use to help elicit and explore emotions is to provide short scenarios or stories, with details relating to a particular experience. These scenarios lead to a decision-making point, and then present participants with a range of questions. Initially, questions should ask participants how the scenario or story made them feel. It can then be helpful to ask participants what they would do next or what they think the person in the scenario should do next. This allows participants to talk through the decision-making process they think should be made, or how they would make a decision about what to do next.

This technique is an indirect way to elicit and explore emotional responses. As participants are asked to share emotions related to a situation separate from themselves, they are able to explore emotions relating to more sensitive or taboo topics (such as sexual health) without emotions such as shame or embarrassment clouding their responses, or indeed, self-censoring what they share to hide their true feelings.

Scenarios also allow participants to think through and imagine their responses to situations they have not actually experienced themselves. This allows them to explore emotional responses to possible and future situations, rather than more narrowly defined emotions relating to what has happened and emotions they have felt in the past. Again, this technique works well in interview or focus group

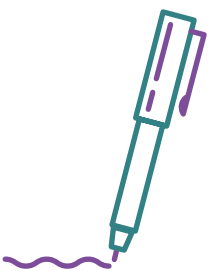
settings, where there is direct interaction between the researcher and participant(s), and the researcher can probe or explore answers further.



Storytelling (self-narrative)

If you are seeking to explore a range of possible emotions and how they relate to more complex decision-making situations, it can be helpful to use open-ended questions to ask a participant to 'tell their own story,' or share their experience related to a particular life event or experience.

Through telling their own story, participants become the authors of their emotions, sharing what they feel is important and in a way that makes sense to them. This can provide valid insight into their emotional decision-making process, and longer stories can show the wider context and the emotional drivers that influence their behaviours. An example question could be: "Can you share with me how you found and came to be involved with this service?".



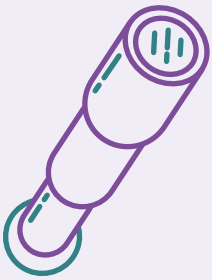
Self-expression through non-verbal methods

Asking participants to verbally articulate their feelings is not always possible or appropriate. In some instances, participants may not be able to articulate their emotions verbally.

For example, in research with young children to explore how they make friends at the start of primary school, or research exploring more complex or traumatic emotions (such as support options for victims of sexual assault).

In such instances, it can often be more appropriate, or of more benefit, to ask participants to express their feelings through artistic or visual forms, such as visual representations (collages, drawings, use of colour and design) or music and dance,

such as: “If you could pick a song to sum up how you feel about the service, what would it be?” or “What song comes to mind when you think about this service?”. If appropriate, you could then follow up with a question to explore why they chose that song.



Observation

A final way the researcher can uncover and explore emotions is to observe them. It is possible to discern emotions through observation and analysis of body language, expressions, and tone of voice in participants.

This technique is most appropriate (and can only really be undertaken) in settings where the researcher can see the participant, such as focus group settings, in-person interviews, or ethnography. If you want to use observation as part of a focus group setting, it is advisable to have another researcher in addition to the facilitator attend to sit and observe, or video record the session if possible. This enables the observer to note observations while the facilitator can focus on running the group, and video recording allows the researchers to re-watch the session and pick up on emotional cues and reactions at a later time.

Observation can be most useful for eliciting and understanding emotional reactions to a range of options, such as proposed changes in service provision, or to new branding and website design.

How should I interpret and analyse emotions in research?

Once your primary research is complete and you’ve gathered together a range of information, you need to analyse the emotions within the data and interpret them to form insights and recommendations related to the topic area.

Perhaps the main question to consider here is: "How do I know what they feel?". That is, how can you be sure the emotion that is being ascribed in the analysis is a true reflection of each participant's actual emotion?

Often, the easiest and quickest way to check that you have interpreted emotions correctly is to reflect back those emotions to participants during the research process itself. This could simply be a statement such as: "From what you've said, it sounds like you feel angry, is that right?". Other ways to check the interpretation is to analyse the emotions from the data at two separate time points; as soon as possible after the research to note initial feelings, and then a day or two later to compare any differences or to see if your interpretation remains constant. Another way can be to ask another researcher to review the primary research sources and look over your analysis to assess how far they agree with your interpretation.

The most straight forward option to help transform emotions from the research into actionable insights and recommendations is to read through and review the information, and as you identify emotions, annotate and make a note of them as you go. You can then compile a list of feelings that have been uncovered through the analysis, how frequently these occur, and what the feelings relate to.

Following this, you can use the types of emotion, what they relate to, and the frequency with which they occur to form insights that address these emotions. For example, let's take a look at responses to the question: "Can you share with me how you found out and came to be involved in this service?".

If many participants said they found out about a service via their GP, and that they got involved with the service because they wanted to make friends, this indicates both trust in their GP as a source of information and a feeling of being lonely, which they are seeking to address through the service.

Knowing these feelings (he/she trusts their GP and feels lonely) can be used to support effective decision making about the service itself. Linking into addressing loneliness, the service could ensure that future activities continue to enable and support people to make friends and meet people as a key part of its work. Linking into feelings of trust in GPs, the service should work with GPs.

We can help you apply this methodology and approach to your own projects. Just contact our research team to find out more!



¹ Yuval Noah Harari, *12 Lessons for the 21st Century*, p. 47

Summary

Understanding the role that emotions play in decision making processes is key to both understanding and changing behaviour. Using the research methods outlined in this guide will help you to ask the right questions and explore participants' experiences, thoughts and feelings. This will in-turn provide important insights into their emotions and their role in influencing behaviour. However, it is important that these methods are followed up with careful analyses and validity checks to ensure that they are in fact true reflections of participants' actual emotions.

If you would like to find out more about obtaining emotional insights or discuss a research project of your own, our expert research team can help. They are no strangers to conducting research into emotions and have plenty of experience with obtaining key audience insights – **get in touch with them today!**

We only work with organisations that want to bring about positive social change, and people who want to do good. We think this is you... Let's talk.



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