Chapter 8: Survey Research

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Why Survey Research?

Survey research is the art and science of acquiring knowledge by asking questions. Survey research holds a special place in the hierarchy of statistical, and information gathering, techniques. It is the Swiss Army Knife of research, and very well developed.

In 2008, the voters of the United States elected our first African American president, Barack Obama. It may not surprise you to learn that when President Obama was coming of age in the 1970s, one-quarter of Americans reported that they would not vote for a qualified African American presidential nominee. Three decades later, when President Obama ran for the presidency, fewer than 8% of Americans still held that position, and President Obama won the election. [1]

General Social Survey

We know about these trends in voter opinion because the General Social Survey (http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/GSS+Website), a nationally representative survey of American adults, included questions about race and voting over the years described here. Without survey research, we may not know how Americans' perspectives on race and the presidency shifted over these years.

[1] Smith, T. W. (2009). Trends in willingness to vote for a black and woman for president, 1972–2008. *GSS Social Change Report No. 55.* Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center.

8.1 Survey Research: What Is It and When Should It Be Used?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define survey research.
- Identify when it is appropriate to employ survey research as a data-collection strategy.

Most of you have probably taken a survey at one time or another, so you probably have a pretty good idea of what a survey is. Sometimes students in my research methods classes feel that understanding what a survey is and how to write one is so obvious, there's no need to dedicate any class time to learning about it. This feeling is understandable—surveys are very much a part of our everyday lives—we've probably all taken one, we hear about their results in the news, and perhaps we've even administered one ourselves. What students quickly learn is that there is more to constructing a good survey than meets the eye.

Survey design takes a great deal of thoughtful planning and often a great many rounds of revision. But it is worth the effort. As we'll learn in this chapter, there are many benefits to choosing survey research as one's method of data collection. We'll take a look at what a survey is exactly, what some of the benefits and drawbacks of this method are, how to construct a survey, and what to do with survey data once one has it in hand.

Surveys are a Quantitative Method

Survey research is a quantitative method whereby a researcher poses some set of predetermined questions to an entire group, or sample, of individuals. Survey research is an especially useful approach when a researcher aims to describe or explain features of a very large group or groups. This method may also be used as a way of quickly gaining some general details about one's population of interest to help prepare for a more focused, in-depth study using time-intensive methods such as in-depth interviews or field research. In this case, a survey may help a researcher identify specific individuals or locations from which to collect additional data.

As is true of all methods of data collection, survey research is better suited to answering some kinds of research question more than others. In addition, as you'll recall from Chapter 6 "Defining and Measuring Concepts", operationalization works differently with different research methods. If your interest is in political activism, for example, you likely operationalize that concept differently in a survey than you would for a field research study of the same topic.

Summary

- Survey research is often used by researchers who wish to explain trends or features of large groups. It may also be used to assist those planning some more focused, in-depth study.

Exercise

1. Recall some of the possible research questions you came up with while reading previous chapters of this text. How might you frame those questions so that they could be answered using survey research?

8.2 Pros and Cons of Survey Research

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify and explain the strengths of survey research.
- Identify and explain the weaknesses of survey research.

Survey research, as with all methods of data collection, comes with both strengths and weaknesses. We'll examine both in this section.

Strengths of Survey Method

Researchers employing survey methods to collect data enjoy a number of benefits. First, surveys are an excellent way to gather lots of information from many people. In my own study of older people's experiences in the workplace, I was able to mail a written questionnaire to around 500 people who lived throughout the state of Maine at a cost of just over $1,000. This cost included printing copies of my seven-page survey, printing a cover letter, addressing and stuffing envelopes, mailing the survey, and buying return postage for the survey. I realize that $1,000 is nothing to sneeze at. But just imagine what it might have cost to visit each of those people individually to interview them in person. Consider the cost of gas to drive around the state, other travel costs, such as meals and lodging while on the road, and the cost of time to drive to and talk with each person individually. We could double, triple, or even quadruple our costs pretty quickly by opting for an in-person method of data collection over a mailed survey. Thus, surveys are relatively **cost effective.**

Related to the benefit of cost effectiveness is a survey's potential for **generalizability**. Because surveys allow researchers to collect data from very large samples for a relatively low cost, survey methods lend themselves to probability sampling techniques, which we discussed in Chapter 7 "Sampling". Of all the data-collection methods described in this text, survey research is probably the best method to use when one hopes to gain a representative picture of the attitudes and characteristics of a large group.

Survey research also tends to be a **reliable** method of inquiry. This is because surveys are standardized in that the same questions, phrased in exactly the same way, are posed to participants. Other methods, such as qualitative interviewing, which we'll learn about in Chapter 9 "Interviews: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches", do not offer the same consistency that a quantitative survey offers. This is not to say that all surveys are always reliable. A poorly phrased question can cause respondents to interpret its meaning differently, which can reduce that question's reliability. Assuming well-constructed question and questionnaire design, one strength of survey methodology is its potential to produce reliable results.

Versatility

The **versatility** of survey research is also an asset. Surveys are used by all kinds of people in all kinds of professions. I repeat, surveys are used by all kinds of people in all kinds of professions. Is there a light bulb switching on in your head? I hope so. The versatility offered by survey research means that understanding how to construct and administer surveys is a useful skill to have for all kinds of jobs. Lawyers might use surveys in their efforts to select juries, social service and other organizations (e.g., churches, clubs, fundraising groups, activist groups) use them to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts, businesses use them to learn how to market their products, governments use them to understand community opinions and needs, and politicians and media outlets use surveys to understand their constituencies.

In sum, the following are benefits of survey research:

1. Cost-effective
2. Generalizable
3. Reliable
4. Versatile

Should we add survey fatigue? Students frequently report that they feel they are over surveyed. With the advent and proliferation of computer mediated surveys, and the ability to gather and analyze massive amounts of data from our electronic footprint, survey use has grown proportionally.

Weaknesses of Survey Method

As with all methods of data collection, survey research also comes with a few drawbacks. First, while one might argue that surveys are flexible in the sense that we can ask any number of questions on any number of topics in them, the fact that the survey researcher is generally stuck with a single instrument for collecting data (the questionnaire), surveys are in many ways rather **inflexible.** Let's say you mail a survey out to 1,000 people and then discover, as responses start coming in, that your phrasing on a particular question seems to be confusing a number of respondents. At this stage, it's too late for a do-over or to change the question for the respondents who haven't yet returned their surveys. When conducting in-depth interviews, on the other hand, a researcher can provide respondents further explanation if they're confused by a question and can tweak their questions as they learn more about how respondents seem to understand them.

Validity & Surveys

Validity can also be a problem with surveys. Survey questions are standardized; thus, it can be difficult to ask anything other than very general questions that a broad range of people will understand. Because of this, survey results may not be as valid as results obtained using methods of data collection that allow a researcher to more comprehensively examine whatever topic is being studied. Let's say, for example, that you want to learn something about voters' willingness to elect an African American president, as in our opening example in this chapter. General Social Survey respondents were asked, "If your party nominated an African American for president, would you vote for him if he were qualified for the job?" Respondents were then asked to respond either yes or no to the question. But what if someone's opinion was more complex than could be answered with a simple yes or no? What if, for example, a person was willing to vote for an African American woman but not an African American man?I am not at all suggesting that such a perspective makes any sense, but it is conceivable that an individual might hold such a perspective.

In sum, potential drawbacks to survey research include the following:

1. Inflexibility
2. Validity

Summary

- Strengths of survey research include its cost effectiveness, generalizability, reliability, and versatility.
- Weaknesses of survey research include inflexibility and issues with validity.

Exercises

1. What are some ways that survey researchers might overcome the weaknesses of this method?
2. Find an article reporting results from survey research (remember how to use Sociological Abstracts?). How do the authors describe the strengths and weaknesses of their study? Are any of the strengths or weaknesses described here mentioned in the article?

8.3 Types of Surveys

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define cross-sectional surveys, provide an example of a cross-sectional survey, and outline some of the drawbacks of cross-sectional research.
- Describe the various types of longitudinal surveys.
- Define retrospective surveys, and identify their strengths and weaknesses.
- Discuss some of the benefits and drawbacks of the various methods of delivering self-administered questionnaires.

There is much variety when it comes to surveys. This variety comes both in terms of **time**—when or with what frequency a survey is administered—and in terms of **administration**—how a survey is delivered to respondents. In this section, we'll take a look at what types of surveys exist when it comes to both time and administration.

Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Surveys

In terms of time, there are two main types of surveys: cross-sectional and longitudinal.

Cross-Sectional Research

Cross-sectional surveys are those that are administered at just one point in time. These surveys offer researchers a sort of snapshot in time and give us an idea about how things are for our respondents at the particular point in time that the survey is administered. My own study of older workers mentioned previously is an example of a cross-sectional survey. I administered the survey at just one time.

Another example of a cross-sectional survey comes from Aniko Kezdy and colleagues' study of the association between religious attitudes, religious beliefs, and mental health among students in Hungary. [1] These researchers administered a single, one-time-only, cross-sectional survey to a convenience sample of 403 high school and college students. The survey focused on how religious attitudes impact various aspects of one's life and health. The researchers found from analysis of their cross-sectional data that anxiety and depression were highest among those who had both strong religious beliefs and also some doubts about religion.

Yet another recent example of cross-sectional survey research can be seen in Bateman and colleagues' study of how the perceived publicness of social networking sites influences users' self-disclosures. [2] These researchers administered an online survey to undergraduate and graduate business students. They found that even though revealing information about oneself is viewed as key to realizing many of the benefits of social networking sites, respondents were less willing to disclose information about themselves as their perceptions of a social networking site's publicness rose. That is, there was a negative relationship between perceived publicness of a social networking site and plans to self-disclose on the site.

One Problem with Cross-Sectional Surveys

One problem with cross-sectional surveys is that the events, opinions, behaviors, and other phenomena that such surveys are designed to assess don't generally remain stagnant. Thus, generalizing from a cross-sectional survey about the way things are can be tricky; perhaps you can say something about the way things were in the moment that you administered your survey, but it is difficult to know whether things remained that way for long after you administered your survey. Think, for example, about how Americans might have responded if administered a survey asking for their opinions on terrorism on September 10, 2001. Now imagine how responses to the same set of questions might differ were they administered on September 12, 2001. The point is not that cross-sectional surveys are useless; they have many important uses. But researchers must remember what they have captured by administering a cross-sectional survey; that is, as previously noted, a snapshot of life as it was at the time that the survey was administered.

One way to overcome this sometimes problematic aspect of cross-sectional surveys is to administer a longitudinal survey. **Longitudinal surveys** are those that enable a researcher to make observations over some extended period of time. There are several types of longitudinal surveys, including trend, panel, and cohort surveys. We'll discuss all three types here, along with another type of survey called retrospective. Retrospective surveys fall somewhere in between cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys.

Longitudinal Surveys

Trend Survey

The first type of longitudinal survey is called a **trend** survey. The main focus of a trend survey is, perhaps not surprisingly, trends. Researchers conducting trend surveys are interested in how people's inclinations change over time. The Gallup opinion polls are an excellent example of trend surveys. You can read more about Gallup on their website: http://www.gallup.com/Home.aspx. To learn about how public opinion changes over time, Gallup administers the same questions to people at different points