Chapter 9. Survey Research

Survey research method is the most frequently used mode of gathering data in the social sciences.

Topics covered in this chapter
- Topics appropriate to survey research
- Guidelines for asking questions
- Questionnaire construction
- Types of survey research
- Strengths and weaknesses of survey research methods
- Secondary analysis

What are the topics appropriate to survey research methods?
- Surveys can be used in descriptive, exploratory or explanatory research
- With most surveys, individuals are the units of analysis
- Surveys are the best when the question is about attitudes and orientations in a large population

What are the guidelines for asking questions?

Open-ended vs. closed-ended questions
- Open-ended - respondents are asked to provide their own answer to the question. (Similar to essay questions in our exams)
  - Adv.: flexible, all responses can be represented.
  - Disadv.: difficult to process for computer analysis. Some respondents may give irrelevant answers.
- Closed-ended - respondents are asked to select an answer from a list provided by the researchers. (Similar to multiple choice questions in our exam)
  - Adv.: provide uniformity of response, and easy to process for computer analysis.
  - Disadv.: relies heavily on researcher's structure of responses.
- Make items clear
  - Don't assume persons who answer the questions have the same knowledge as you have on your research topic. Explain questions and the background clearly.
  - Example: GPA: 0-4 vs. 0-5 scales.

What are the key elements to questionnaire construction?
- A questionnaire should be spread out and uncluttered.
- Use contingency questions when necessary.
- Contingency questions are those that will only be answered by some respondents.
- Format matrix questions so they are easily answered.
- Example: Likert scale type of questions – several questions have the same set of answer categories.
- Be aware of issues with ordering items.
- Earlier questions may have impact on respondents' answers to later questions. Researchers need to be sensitive to this issue.
- Include instructions for the questionnaire.
- Short instructions help respondents make sense of the questionnaire.
- Pretest all or part of the questionnaire.

Avoid double-barreled questions
- Avoid putting many statements in one question and seek for one answer. The respondent may agree with one statement but disagree with the other part.
- Example: “Research methods class is interesting, therefore, more sessions should be offered every semester.” Some students may agree with the second part because they are required to take the class so they want more sessions. But they may disagree with the first part.
- Respondents must be competent to answer
- You need to make sure that the respondents are able to answer your questions reliably.
- Example: asking that they were doing on at noon on Jan. 21, 1984; asking a person who has only raised one child about how she dealt with teenage rivalry.
- Respondents must be willing to answer
- Sensitive issues may require the researchers to convince the respondents of anonymity.

What are the guidelines for asking questions? - Continued

Short items are the best
- Respondents are often unwilling to spend too much time reading long questions.
- Avoid negative items
- Negative questions can easily lead to misinterpretation.
- Example: “Do you feel that criminals should be prohibited from teaching in public universities?” The word “prohibited” may cause confusion. A respondent may think criminals should not teach in public universities by answering “no”. But the way the question is structured, a “no” answer would mean the opposite.
- Avoid biased items and terms
- The meaning of someone’s response to a question depends in large part on the wording of the question. Questions that encourage respondents to answer in a particular way are biased.
- Example: “Don't you agree with the Supreme Court decision that...?” The way the question is phrased makes it difficult for a respondent to say “no.”
What are the types of survey methods?

- Self-administered survey
- Face-to-face interview
- Telephone survey
- Internet survey

What are the important aspects of face-to-face interview surveys?

- The role of the interviewer
  - Neutral
- General rules for interviewing
  - Appearance and demeanor should be similar to those being interviewed
  - Be very familiar with the questionnaire
  - Follow question wording exactly, never rephrase the question
  - Record responses exactly, even grammatical errors. Never reword responses as such rewording might change the meaning of the response.
  - Be neutral when probing for responses. Never suggest an answer.
  - If multiple interviewers are used, the researcher need to coordinate between different interviewers to control quality. Training and supervising are needed.
- CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interview) is widely used now.

What are the important aspects of telephone surveys?

- Mail distribution and return
  - Anything you can do to make the job of completing and returning the survey easier is helpful.
- Monitoring returns - return rate graph
  - Both types can be used.
  - Follow-up mailings: When the graphs get to the flat part, a follow-up mailing is a good idea
  - Acceptable response rate: Practices vary a lot. In Babbie’s view, 50% response rate is ok; 60% is good, and 70% is very good.

What are the important aspects of Internet surveys?

- Issue of representativeness
  - At this point of time, certain segment of the population are less likely to be reached via internet surveys. For example, the elderly and the poor.
  - Depending on the nature of the survey (and thus different theoretical population), the representativeness of the sample varies.

How do these methods compare?

- Cost:
  - Face-to-face is the most expensive. If it’s a nationwide survey, telephone survey can also be costly. Self-administered surveys and Internet surveys are cheaper.
- Response rate:
  - Face-to-face typically has the highest response rate, followed by telephone surveys. Self-administered surveys and Internet surveys tend to have low response rates.
- Incomplete questions:
  - Face-to-face and telephone surveys have fewer incomplete questions because probing can be used by the interviewer.
- Sensitive issues:
  - Self-administered surveys and Internet surveys are the best because they can offer anonymity. Telephone surveys are good too. Face-to-face is the worst
- Complicated issues:
  - Face-to-face is the best, followed by telephone surveys.
  - Personal safety of the interviewers:
  - Self-administered, Internet, and telephone surveys can all avoid this problem.
Weaknesses
- Questionnaire standardization may yield superficiality
- Doesn't deal with context of social life
- Artificial - cannot measure action

Strengths
- The use of standardized questionnaire enhances reliability.
- Characteristics of a large population can be described using large samples.
- Many questions may be asked on a given topic - leads to flexibility in analysis.

What are the strengths and weaknesses with secondary analysis?

Strengths
- Efficiency - time and money
- Unobtrusive – the researcher does not have an impact on data collection.
- Government data usually have very good sampling design

Weaknesses
- The data may not reflect a particular measure that a social scientist has constructed.
- The data may not have all the variables one needs.

What are secondary analyses?

- When good existing data sets are available on the research topic, one should consider using these data sets. Such studies are then called secondary analysis.
- Sources of existing statistics
  - ICPSR: http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/ICPSR_homepage.html (U. of U. page), and http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/ICPSR_homepage.html
- Many exiting data are very large and complicated. Extensive training in statistics and computer programming is usually required.

Measurements:
- Dependent variables:
  - Money attitude scale: 4 variables, 31 indicators
- Independent variables:
  - Self-reporting
- Control variables:
  - Gender (male, female)
  - Income (lower, medium, higher)
  - Age (younger, medium, older)

An article applying survey research method


Hypotheses:
- H1: Mexican-Americans will have lower scores than Anglo-Americans on the Power-Prestige scale
- H2: Mexican-Americans will have lower scores than Anglo-Americans on the Retention/Time scale
- H3: Mexican-Americans will have higher scores than Anglo-Americans on the Distrust/Anxiety scale
- Mexican-Americans will have higher scores than Anglo-Americans on the Quality scale

Sample
- Subjects selected from the former students’ roster at a southwestern university that included a large proportion of Mexican-American constituents.
- 6,863 questionnaires mailed out
- 1,132 returned
- Response rate of 16.5%
  - Sampling issues
  - Non-response bias issues
Results:

- Power/Prestige: 1.97 (Anglo), 1.92 (MA), NS
  - Reject H1
- Retention/Time: 4.72 (Anglo), 4.49 (MA), S
  - Support H2
- Distrust/Anxiety: 5.28 (Anglo), 5.26 (MA), NS
  - Reject H3
- Quality: 3.96 (Anglo), 3.78 (MA), S.
  - Reject H4, direction reversed

Additional things to do

Read Medina, Jose, Joel Saegert, & Alicia Gresham (1996). Comparison of Mexican-American and Anglo-American attitudes toward money. Journal of Consumer Affairs, 30(1), 124-145 very carefully. At this point, you should be able to understand most of the issues in this research article. Try to think about theories, unit of analysis, time dimension, major variables, sampling, and mode of observation used in this study. Are there things that can be improved in ideal situations? What are the limitations of this study caused by its research design?