

SURVEY RESEARCH

Research Methods, Fall 2015

Surveys: Overview



- Popular method for quantitative research in the social sciences.
 - Used for descriptive, exploratory, or explanatory research

- Surveys: standardized questionnaires or interviews to collect data about people and their preferences, thoughts, and behaviors in a systematic manner.

- Best for describing a population that is too large to observe directly

Surveys: Overview



- best suited for studies that have individual people as the unit of analysis.
 - Individuals serve as *respondents*

- Groups and organizations can also be studied using surveys
 - Often use a specific person from each unit as a “key informant or a “proxy” for that group

Surveys: Strengths

- Excellent vehicle for measuring a wide variety of **unobservable data**
 - Preferences
 - Political orientation
 - Traits(e.g., self-esteem),
 - Attitudes (e.g., toward immigrants),
 - Beliefs (e.g., about a new law),
 - Behaviors (e.g., smoking or drinking)
 - Factual information (e.g., income)



Surveys: Strengths

- Well-suited for remotely collecting data about a **population that is too large to observe directly.**
 - Example: an entire country
 - Use mail-in, electronic mail, or telephone surveys
 - Sampling: must ensure that the population is adequately represented
- Surveys are sometimes preferred for their **unobtrusive nature** and the ability to respond at one's convenience



Surveys: Strengths

- May be the only way to **reach certain populations**
 - Immigrants, drug users, homeless
- If sample is large enough, may allow for detection of **small effects** even while analyzing multiple variables
- **Economical** in terms of researcher time, effort, and cost



Types of Surveys

- **Questionnaire surveys**
 - Mail-in, group-administered, or online
 - Completed in writing by respondents

- **Interview surveys**
 - Personal, telephone, or focus group interviews
 - Completed by the interviewer based on verbal responses provided by respondents

Questionnaire Surveys

- **Self-administered:** questionnaire is sent to a large number of people
- **Group-administered:** people are brought together in a common place to complete survey

- **Issues with online surveys**
 - Responses can be easily compromised if not password-protected or designed to prevent multiple submissions
 - Sampling Bias: cannot control who answers
 - Cannot reach people that do not have computer

Questionnaires: Response Formats

- **Dichotomous response:** select one of two choices
 - True/false, yes/no, or agree/disagree
 - Do you think that the death penalty is justified under some circumstances (circle one): yes / no.

- **Nominal response:** presented with 2+ **unordered** options
 - What is your industry of employment?
 - Manufacturing
 - Consumer services
 - Retail
 - Education
 - Healthcare
 - Tourism
 - Other _____

Questionnaires: Response Formats

- **Ordinal response: 2+ ordered options**
 - What is your highest level of education:
 - High school
 - College
 - Graduate

- **Interval-level response: 5-point or 7-point scale**
 - Statement and Scale
 - Marijuana should be legal.
 - Agree – Somewhat Agree – Neutral – Somewhat Disagree - Disagree

- **Continuous response: Continuous (ratio-scaled) value with a meaningful zero point,**
 - Age, amount of time in America, etc.

Questionnaires: Wording and Content

- Use **clear and simple language**, avoid jargon
- **Avoid negative wording**
 - Should your local government not raise taxes?
- Do not use words or expressions that may be **interpreted differently** by different respondents
 - Any, just, pretty, something
- **Avoid Biased Terms**
 - Bias: words that steer people to answer in a certain way
 - Must be aware of the *social desirability* of a question

Questionnaires: Wording and Content

□ Avoid **Double-Barreled Questions**

- Double-barrel questions have more than one part and can confuse or mislead respondents
- *Questions should have only one part*
- Avoid the word “**and**”
- Example: “Agree or Disagree: The US should abandon its space program and spend the money on domestic programs.”

Questionnaires: Wording and Content

- Avoid questions that are:
 - Too general
 - How much did you enjoy the VMAs? Very Much – Not at all
 - Too detailed
 - How old are your children?
 - Imaginary
 - If you were in a situation where...?
 - Presumptuous
 - What are the benefits of legalizing marijuana?

Questionnaires: Keep in mind

- Think carefully about question sequence
 - Start with easy questions
 - Never end with open-ended question
 - One topic at a time

- Don't make questionnaires too long
- Assure confidentiality
- Pre-test your questionnaire

Interview Surveys

- More personalized form of data collection
- Can be structured or “unstructured”
 - Structured: Interview reads respondent the list of survey questions
 - Unstructured: Interviewer has a list of questions or a “script” or “protocol” but can deviate from the script
- **Interviewing skills** are needed because interviewer is considered part of the measurement instrument

Surveys & Bias

- **Sampling Bias:** systematically excluding certain people
- **Social Desirability Bias:** respondents tend to avoid negative opinions or embarrassing comments about themselves, will “spin the truth”
- **Recall Bias:** Responses depend on subjects’ motivation, memory, and ability to respond
- **Common Method Bias:** possible covariance shared between independent and dependent variables – can be ruled out using statistical analysis

Homework: Thursday 10/8

- 10 question survey on your topic
 - At least 1 question for each response type

- Typed, formal (as if you would give it out)

- In directions include who the survey is designed for (sample) and info about inclusion criteria