Chapter X

Survey Research, Focus Groups, and Information Technology in Research and Practice

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ABSTRACT

The integration of computing into survey research and focus groups in research and practice in public administration and related fields is the focus of this chapter. Coverage applies to other social science disciplines as well. This chapter reviews uses of computers in computer-assisted information collection (CASIC), computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), and transferring survey research methods onto the Web. A second portion of the chapter gives special attention to continuous audience response technology (CART). An example of a citizen survey focused on growth issues combined with a focus group dealing with the same topic in Cary, North Carolina, is also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Survey research has been a pivotal methodology for academic social science research since World War II. Today, both survey research and focus groups are integral to research and practice in public administration, education, and the social sciences (Morgan, 1998; Dillman 2000; Miller & Salkind, 2002). Simply stated, both surveys and focus groups are forms of interviewing. Focus groups are essentially group interviews (Morgan, 1998). Surveys are individual interviews typically targeted at a single respondent or unit of analysis. In the case of both focus groups and traditional survey research, the enterprise essentially relies on technique captured in a classic book in the field the "art of asking questions" (Payne, 1951). The questions that are asked constitute variables in the language of research. The purpose of asking these questions is to establish relationships between and among independent and dependent variables, while controlling for additional variables that may influence the observed relationship between the independent and dependent variables. We also typically test a series of hypotheses derived from some body of theory. The question-and-answer process integral to surveys and focus groups is also a form of measurement and, as such, is subject to errors of measurement (Miller & Kobayashi, 2000).

The types of questions asked in the fields of public administration and education are extensive. They may concern community aesthetics, growth management issues, budget priorities, education, dimensions of program effectiveness, and feedback from citizens, constituents, or customers (Miller & Kobayashi, 2000). The questions may also involve the attempt to measure some theoretical construct, for example, job satisfaction (Folz, 1996; Miller & Salkind, 2002). The traditional approach to capturing the data via the question-and-answer interviewing process previously described typically involved paper and a pencil and, hence, was called Paper and Pencil Interviewing (PAPI) (Dufour, Kaushal, & Michaud, 1997). The advent of computers promised advantages over the paper-and-pencil approach that included decreased cost and increased convenience and quality. It also promised ways to reduce some of the errors of measurement inherent in the survey research process. Many of these promises have, in fact, been realized. The application of computer-assisted survey information collection methods is the most important development in survey research in the last quarter century (Couper et al., 2002).

This chapter focuses on ways in which computers can enhance the survey research and focus groups processes and looks at this topic through the lens of research and practice in public administration and related fields. It contains a

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