Chapter 12
Survey Research:
Core Principles and Discussion Points

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ABSTRACT

Survey research, in various forms, is the mainstay for social researchers and anyone interested in finding out about people's opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. Survey research evolved from simple data collection to a more sophisticated scientific method and has proved useful in describing various aspects of the human condition as a basis for further action. However, now survey research is being challenged by the digital world as defined by big data, social media, and mobile devices. In the chapter, the authors provide a historical perspective on survey research, along with a brief presentation of foundational elements of survey research. Then, with the intent of evoking reflective discussion, the authors identify some of the core issues and viewpoints surrounding survey research in the present digital world.

INTRODUCTION

Surveys, it seems, are everywhere. It is almost impossible to engage with a business or organization and not be asked to fill in a survey about 'how we are doing' or to be bombarded online with requests to participate in some kind of market research. From education, through to health, business, marketing and entertainment, surveys are commonplace tools for finding out about opinions, beliefs and attitudes of people. Media frequently reports on latest research about human behavior, attitudes and preferences. Likely driven by growing market competitiveness and the desire to understand the complexities of society and human behavior, survey research is perhaps more present now than in previous history.

Survey research can be traced back to the 19th century (Wim de Heer, de Leeuw, & van der Zouwen, 1999). Most significant to the establishment of survey research as a scientific method was Booth's survey of the lives of the working class in Britain in the late 19th century. Booth's approach piqued interest and inspired others to use survey approaches in empirical research (Ayrton, 2017). Prior to Booth, the survey method can be traced back to ancient times. Albeit, in ancient times surveys took the most basic form of population counts, with occasionally other information collected, but it was a survey method nonetheless (Ayrton, 2017). It was the political, economic and social reform agendas post-war that essentially drove the development of survey methods and consolidated survey research as an almost indispensable method of gaining insight into people's beliefs, attitudes and perceptions, behaviors and experiences. From the perspective of sampling statisticians, the beginning of survey research is considered to be 1930-1940 when methods began to consolidate with concepts such as probability sampling, measurable sampling errors, "bias free estimates", structured and unstructured interviews (Groves, 2011). Through to the 1960's, it was somewhat the 'golden age of survey research with much innovation in methods of analysis and data collection, and with response rates of over 90% (Groves, 2011). From the 1960's through to the 1990's the dissemination of surveys was aided by the telephone, and of course, later in the 1950's the availability of computing power began to see new ways of processing survey data and making statistical analysis much more efficient. From the 1990's onwards we have seen a proliferation of survey research aided by computer technology.

The brief preceding discussion makes it clear that from early beginnings through to later developments, the nature of survey research has changed greatly and surveys have been transformed from a tool for gathering collections of facts and figures, to a more explanatory tool involving hypothesis and empirical methods. An in-depth examination of the history of social research, such as that conducted by Ayrton (2017) shows clearly that the the nature of the survey method is embedded in the social circumstances of the time and represents, to varying degrees, an attempt to unravel and understand the complexities of human existence for various purposes, whether it be social reform or other political, research or administrative purposes (Ayrton, 2017).

Survey research has a rich history and it has come to be the mainstay of social research for a myriad of purposes. Given such a long and rich history, it is almost surprising to encounter literature suggesting that the 'end is nigh' for survey research methods. However, following Groves (2011) and others, the view held in the present chapter is that it is not so much the end of survey research but more accurately, survey research is continuing on an evolutionary path, and we are on the cusp of a new era of survey research. In a 1999 paper, de Heer, deLeeuw and van der Zouwen predicted: "Undoubtedly, [survey] design will incorporate new technologies and will focus on reducing respondent's burden, while improving data quality" (p. 25). Now, almost 20 years later, we see that new technologies are certainly integrated into survey design but as it turns out, the way for better data quality is not clear cut. Debate and discussion around survey methods abound. The core purpose of the present chapter is twofold: To provide a fundamental understanding of survey research, and to raise issues and to evoke critical discussion around survey methodology in the digital age.

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