

An Overview of Survey Use

Survey Basics

Surveys are often used for evaluations and research to collect data. The concept of creating and administering a survey is deceptively simple. You probably have been asked to take several surveys, so you (and many others) most likely feel you understand the idea well enough. Taking a survey means answering questions, and administering a survey involves asking questions. As simple as this process appears, you probably won't be surprised to find that there is a bit more to it than that.

Many of the definitions provided for the term *survey* involve describing the function or purpose of the process. In the social sciences, "to survey" means getting a general picture or description of some identifiable group of individuals. However, a survey also refers to a data collection instrument used to gather information from the group of individuals you want to understand better. The term *survey* is used to describe the activity but also the data collection instrument. *Survey Research* refers to any study or evaluation that uses a survey as its primary data collection method.

When people talk about using a survey, they usually mean a sample survey. In a *sample survey*, researchers select only a portion of some target population with the intention of generalizing the results to all those in that population. When researchers survey the entire population, they are conducting a *census*. However, in many cases, surveying the entire population is not feasible; as an alternative, researchers collect information from some individuals to gain insights into the entire group. If done correctly, surveying a portion of the population will produce a reasonable description of the entire population.

Definitions

A **survey** is a self-report data collection instrument designed to get information from individuals in a specific group.

A **sample survey** refers to any survey that gathers information from a sample group in order to make generalizations about the group's population.

A **representative sample** is one that provides a reasonable representation of the population targeted in the study.

Survey research refers to any study or evaluation that uses a survey as its primary data collection method.

Several aspects of a survey research study determine its quality, but the overall quality of the study will primarily depend on the quality of the survey instrument used to collect information. More specifically, the quality of the items on the survey instruments has a significant impact on the overall

quality of the study. It is relatively easy to write survey questions, but it takes effort and skill to craft good ones. It is important to make sure the survey asks all the right questions, in the right way, and is administered to the right people.

The results from a survey may be used to gain insights about a specific group of individuals, but they also can be used to make generalizations about the population the sample comes from. The degree to which the generalizations are valid depends on the sampling methods used and the response rate. In order for the results to be generalizable, the sample must be a *representative sample*, meaning those responding to the survey are a reasonable representation of the population targeted in the study.

Survey research is conducted for a variety of purposes. Often the researcher wants only to better understand the characteristics of individuals in a specific population. Characteristics of interest might include attitudes, opinions, trends, or perceptions. The only way to get these data is to ask individuals directly. This means the respondents must be willing and able to answer the questions truthfully and accurately; the value of any survey research study depends on this. If you can get a more accurate measure of a characteristic in another way, a self-report survey may not be your best choice for data collection.

Understandably, critics of survey research point out these limitations as a reason to question the results of many studies. But with any assessment tool, there will be measurement error. Proponents of survey research point out that having a reasonable estimate, even if not perfect, is often better than having no data at all. However, when conducting survey research you must recognize, attend to, and address threats to validity by designing and creating good surveys.

Types of Surveys

Surveys can take various forms, but the most common form is a questionnaire. In this course, we will also discuss how to create a scale. The basic difference between these two types of surveys is the relationship between the items on the survey instrument.

Each item stands on its own in a questionnaire and is reported separately. Each item provides data that can help answer different parts of the research question. In a scale, the items work together to describe a specific construct or an attribute of an individual participant. Each item in the scale focuses on one aspect of the construct. In a scale, the item responses are combined to create a score. The construct being measured is often affective in nature in that it describes some attribute of the individual respondent. For example, a scale might measure typical feelings, attitudes, or perceptions about something. The resulting score is an indication of the magnitude and direction of the attribute being measured.

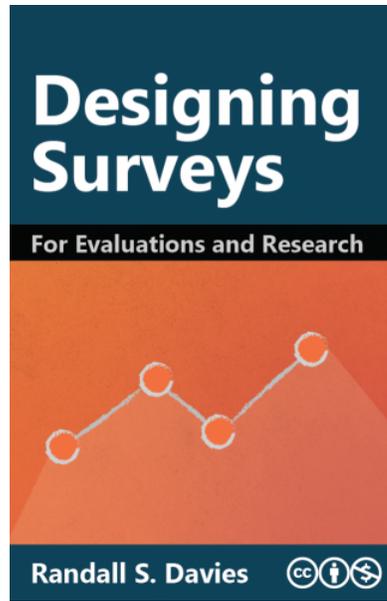
With both survey forms, summarizing the results of those individuals participating in the survey can be used to describe those in the population (i.e., the proportion of individuals within a specific category or, in the case of a scale, the average score of individuals within the population). However, a scale might also be used as a measurement instrument designed to describe some characteristic of an individual but not necessarily a description of the targeted population.

Chapter Summary

- A **survey** is a self-report data collection instrument.
- Surveys typically take the form of a questionnaire but can also be designed as a scale (or a mixture of the two).
- In a questionnaire, each item acts independently of the others and is analyzed and reported separately.
- In a scale, several items work together to provide a score that represents the degree to which an individual possesses some characteristic.
- Surveys are often administered online (for convenience and cost reasons) but they can be administered in other ways, for example, as an interview.
- **Survey research** includes any study that uses a survey as its main data collection tool.
- Although a survey may not be the ideal method for studying every research question, a well-designed survey can enhance our understanding of just about any issue.
- A survey is often the only means available to get the information needed to answer certain research questions.
- Most survey research is non-experimental (i.e., descriptive research) but surveys are also used in experimental and quasi-experimental research. Survey research is mostly seen as a quantitative research method.
- Surveying the entire population is called a census.
- Sample surveys obtain information from a representative group in the target population then attempt to make generalizable conclusions about those in the population.
- In order to make valid generalizations, the sample used must be a representative sample of the target population.
- Conducting high-quality survey research will depend on asking the right questions, in the right way, to the right people.
- It is easy to create a flawed survey. Without careful attention to overall survey design and the creation of the survey items, the study will likely produce invalid results.

Discussion Questions

1. Under what condition would a survey be a good choice for your research?
2. When would a scale be needed rather than a questionnaire?



Davies, R. S. (2020). *Designing Surveys for Evaluations and Research*. EdTech Books.
https://edtechbooks.org/designing_surveys