

Chapter 20

Survey Research: Methods, Issues, and the Future

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ABSTRACT

Survey research is prevalent among many professional fields. Both cost-effective and time-efficient, this method of research is commonly used for the purposes of gaining insight into the attitudes, thoughts, and opinions of populations. Additionally, because there are several types of survey research designs and data collection instruments, the researcher has the flexibility to determine which methods will work best for his or her particular study. However, regardless of the method, the researcher must carefully select an excising instrument or construct the data collection instrument, as this is the key to a successful survey research study. This chapter defines survey research, outlines the basic structure for conducting such research, identifies some of the major challenges surrounding survey research and provides some recommendations, and provides some insights into the shape of survey research in the future.

INTRODUCTION

From the Gallup polls to the Internet, surveys have become increasingly popular as a way of finding out what people think about certain topics and issues. As noted by Berends (2006), survey research can be used for “monitoring important trends in society, testing our theoretical understanding of social processes, providing information to firms

through market research, guiding politicians through polling of public opinion on key political issues and strategies, and providing key indicators of what is going on in our society” (p. 623). Even more important during an election, polls demonstrate the vital significance of determining people’s beliefs, attitudes, and opinions. Although many people understand the importance of such large-scale surveys, this type of information seeking is

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also valuable in smaller-scale research designs. Frequently used in education, surveys provide constructive feedback to educational administrators regarding teacher job satisfaction, burnout, educational climate, parental attitudes towards school board decisions, student opinions regarding class options, and much more beneficial information. In doing so, changes can be made and ideas can be adapted to increase the success of schools and educational programs.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the dimensions of survey research and to highlight considerations that must be taken into account in order for the approach to be a practical and effective method of data exploration. Specifically, this chapter will provide information regarding the basic components of survey research, including the steps involved in conducting this type of research, the controversies and issues surrounding survey research, as well as solutions and recommendations to counter such issues. Finally, this paper will discuss trends and technologies driving the future of survey research.

BACKGROUND OF SURVEY RESEARCH

What Is Survey Research?

Ideal for use in education, survey research is used to gather information about population groups to “learn about their characteristics, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 183). This is done by administering a questionnaire, either written or orally, to a group of respondents, and the responses to the questions form the data for the study (Berends, 2006; Best & Kahn, 2003; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Mertler & Charles, 2008; Polit & Beck, 2006). Gay et al. (2009) define the questionnaire, or survey, as “an instrument to collect data that describes

one or more characteristics of a specific population” (p. 175). While Gay et al.’s definition of a survey is sufficient explanation of the tool, the conceptualization of survey research by Murphy, Hill and Dean (2014, p. 1) captures beautifully the true essence of survey research: “Conducting survey research is at its core, a social interaction between a researcher and a (potential) respondent – a “conversation with a purpose”.

Some researchers may be able to work with the entire population, which is referred to as a census (Berends, 2006; Gay et al.; Mertler & Charles, 2008). However, most survey research is conducted with a sample of respondents from the target population. If proper sampling techniques are employed, the researcher can generalize the attitudes and ideas from the sample to the larger population (Fraenkel & Wallen; Gay et al.; Leedy & Ormrod; McMillan & Schumacher).

Why Do We Conduct Survey Research?

As previously mentioned, survey research is used to gain insight into the thoughts, ideas, opinions, and attitudes of a population. It is descriptive in nature, so unlike experimental designs, the researcher does not manipulate variables (Burns & Grove, 2005). Instead, the survey researcher describes and draws conclusions from frequency counts and other types of analysis. Although it is descriptive in nature, well-designed survey research may serve as a stimulus for more in depth analytical research. Many correlational and causal-comparative studies include survey research as part of the data collection process (Burns & Grove; Mertler & Charles, 2008).

While survey research does not provide causal results it can provide rich information about populations, which in turn, provides a platform for action. Survey research can be seen as being driven by the desire to understand aspects of the human condition. In everything from business to education to medicine, survey research is com-

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