Survey Research

From surveys we can learn how large groups of people think and act. To trust generalizations made on the basis of surveys, however, the sample must be representative, the response rate sufficient, the questions unbiased, the data collection procedures uniform, and the data coding and analysis accurate. Researchers use the survey method to ask questions about the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of respondents for the purpose of describing both the characteristics of those respondents and the population(s) they were chose to represent.

We can learn a lot simply by asking people what we want to know. . .

THE PREVALENCE OF SURVEYS IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Survey Methodology is the most often used methodology in communication research. It is particularly useful for two reasons:

1. It allows researchers to gather descriptive information about populations too large for every member to be studied individually.
2. It involves a relatively straightforward research strategy: Ask people questions and analyze their answers.

Differences between Experimental Design and Survey Methods

Experimental Design: purpose is to manipulate independent variables to determine their influence on dependent variables. (CAUSATION)

Survey Method: purpose is to use correlational designs to assess all the variables of interest at one point in time in order to describe the relationships among them.

1) ESTABLISH NONCAUSAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VARIABLES
2) ASSESS RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VARIABLES!
Three Applied Uses of Survey Research - "Measuring Public Opinion"

Political Polls

1. Survey large samples of potential voters to measure popular support for different candidates or political issues, particularly with regard to voting in upcoming elections.
2. Designed to predict the results of elections.
3. Accuracy is dependent on a number of factors (sample, questions).
4. Examples: Gallup Polls.
5. Modern political polling techniques are extremely accurate.

Evaluation Research

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of specific programs or products by inquiring about the relevant experiences and feelings of clients or customers.
   a. Summative Evaluation - conducted AFTER program to determine overall effectiveness.
   b. Formative Evaluation - conducted DURING process to identify ways to refine it.
2. NEED Analysis - uses surveys to
   a. Identify specific problems experienced by a target group;
   b. Compares what exists to what is preferred;
   c. As well as potential solutions.
   d. USED TO DEVELOP INTERVENTION (Training) PROGRAMS to help relieve identified problems;
   e. Programs are then evaluated after intervention.
3. ORGANIZATIONAL FEEDBACK Surveys and AUDITS
   a. ICA Communication Audit.
   b. Assesses current or potential opportunities or constraints facing the organization.
   c. Identifies Strengths and Weaknesses of Communication within organizations.
4. NETWORK ANALYSIS
   a. Examines the pattern of interactions between members of a social network (a grouping of individuals within a social system who engage in interaction).
b. Information is used to "map" the actual patterns of interaction within the social system
   i. Three types of communication networks
      1. Total system networks
      2. Clique networks
      3. Personal networks

Market Research

1. Used to identify consumer reactions, interests, and preferences for purchasing and using specific goods and services.
2. Determines current levels of consumption of products and services.
4. Used to evaluate consumer satisfaction with existing products.
5. Predicts consumer preferences for new products.
6. Used to identify persuasive strategies for product packaging, pricing, and advertising.
7. TYPES
   i. Readership surveys
   ii. Audience ratings
      1. Identify size and composition of the audience that different programs and stations reach
      2. Determine market shares
   iii. Establish prices for commercial time

Uses of Surveys in Communication Research

1. Describe people and their communication behavior
2. Used to examine the nature of communication within organizations
3. Used to examine the relationship between consumers and their use of the mass media
4. Attempts to do the following things:
   a. Define the nature of communication.
   b. Show how communication is related to other things.
   c. Describe communication characteristics of respondents for the purpose of building theories or generalizations about the population they represent.
d. Test theoretical predictions about the relationship between communication and other behavior in a population of interest.

SURVEY RESEARCH DESIGN

SURVEY MEASUREMENT TECHNIQUES

Surveys can be done in two ways: 1) as paper tests (self-reports) in which participants record their responses (these can be done any way that paper can be distributed such as mailing, distributed, online…) or 2) as interviews in which interviewers record the participant’s responses (these can be done by phone as well as face to face).

Regardless of which of the above methods is used, the design of surveys is fairly standard. Respondents are exposed to some message (this can be in visual, audio, written, or spoken form) and asked questions about their reactions to the message.

Designing Questions for Survey Instruments (Paper Tests and Interviews)

1. Have a very clear idea of what you want to know, and then think of the best ways to elicit that information from participants.
2. Consider the use of complementary stimuli. Does it help to have a visual cue? An audio cue? Will the inclusion of such cues bias the participants in some way?
3. Write the survey out in full. Revise!!!
   a. Be very careful with formatting (so that it is clear where answers go and what the questions are).
   b. Have 5 people read the survey and provide feedback.
4. Keep in mind the following advice:
   a. RULE NUMBER 1: Surveys must be designed in such a way as to elicit participant reactions without in some way influencing those reactions (bias).
      i. To minimize bias:
         1. Be careful about how statements are worded (avoid loaded questions).
         2. Ask about one and only one issue (avoid double-barreled questions).
3. **Make the statements/questions clear and to the point** (easy to understand and thus respond to).

4. **Avoid the use of emotion laden language** (which might bias people’s responses).

5. **Avoid the use of double negatives** (i.e. “one should not never” because double negatives are difficult to respond to).

6. **Avoid the use of tag questions** (because these exert psychological pressure to agree).

b. Three general guidelines about formatting

1. Demographic questions should go last.
2. Questions about the same topic should be grouped together
3. Order of items in measures should be varied to minimize "response error".

c. Except in very rare cases, single item measures are useless. These rare cases include:

   i. Gender: there are a limited number of categories here (depending on the definition of “gender” which can mean “biological sex” or “gender orientation” or “sexual orientation” and so on)

   ii. Ethnicity: while again there are multiple categories possible, there are not an infinite number of these categories and researchers can define ethnicity as appropriate.

   iii. Factual information (age, birth date, name...).

d. Usually groups of items are used to represent the phenomenon of interest. For example, if someone wanted to measure “attitudes toward recycling”, they could use:

   i. A Likert scale in which people agree or disagree with multiple statements about recycling.

   ii. A Semantic Differential in which people chose their location in the range between polar opposite adjectives.

   iii. An established measure such as the “Attitudes toward Recycling” scale that has established reliabilities (Cronbach’s alpha).
iv. Combinations of the above.

v. To calculate reliabilities and perform factor analysis, there has to be at least 2 items.

SURVEY RESEARCH SUMMARY

Survey Method - a specific research methodology which selects respondents from a specific population, asks questions concerning beliefs, attitudes, and behavior, and permits answers to be analyzed to describe characteristics of both respondents and the populations they were chosen to represent. A research method that uses measurement techniques to gather information about the attitudes and behaviors of a defined population on the basis of answers to questions posed to samples drawn from the population.

Surveys allow us to see an overview of a vast territory... an overview of human behavior. We collect a little information from a lot of people and then analyze the data to identify some patterns among them and others like them. From surveys we can learn how large groups of people think and act. To trust generalizations made on the basis of surveys, however, the sample must be representative, the response rate sufficient, the questions unbiased, the data collection procedures uniform, and the data coding and analysis accurate. Researchers use the survey method to ask questions about the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of respondents for the purpose of describing both the characteristics of those respondents and the population(s) they were chose to represent.