

Assessing survey research

Survey research, as with all methods of data collection, comes with both strengths and weaknesses. We'll examine both in this section.

Strengths of survey methods

Researchers employing survey methods to collect data enjoy a number of benefits. First, surveys are an excellent way to gather lots of information from many people. Some methods of administering surveys can be cost effective. In a study of older people's experiences in the workplace, researchers were able to mail a written questionnaire to around 500 people who lived throughout the state of Maine at a cost of just over \$1,000. This cost included printing copies of a seven-page survey, printing a cover letter, addressing and stuffing envelopes, mailing the survey, and buying return postage for the survey. In some contexts, \$1,000 is a lot of money, but just imagine what it might have cost to visit each of those people individually to interview them in person. You would have to dedicate a few weeks of your life at least, drive around the state, and pay for meals and lodging to interview each person individually. We could double, triple, or even quadruple our costs pretty quickly by opting for an in-person method of data collection over a mailed survey.

Related to the benefit of cost-effectiveness is a survey's potential for generalizability. Because surveys allow researchers to collect data from very large samples for a relatively low cost, survey methods lend themselves to probability sampling techniques, which we discussed in Chapter 6. Of all the data collection methods described in this textbook, survey research is probably the best method to use when one hopes to gain a representative picture of the attitudes and characteristics of a large group.

Survey research also tends to be a reliable method of inquiry. This is because surveys are standardized in that the same questions, phrased in exactly the same way, are posed to participants. Other methods, such as qualitative interviewing, which we'll learn about in Chapter 9, do not offer the same consistency that a quantitative survey offers. This is not to say that all surveys are always reliable. A poorly phrased question can cause respondents to interpret its meaning differently, which can reduce that question's reliability. Assuming well-constructed questions and survey design, one strength of this methodology is its potential to produce reliable results.

The versatility of survey research is also an asset. Surveys are used by all kinds of people in all kinds of professions. The versatility offered by survey research means that understanding how to construct and administer surveys is a useful skill to have for all kinds of jobs. Lawyers might use surveys in their efforts to select juries, social service and other organizations (e.g., churches, clubs, fundraising groups, activist groups) use them to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts, businesses use them to learn how to market their products, governments use them to understand community opinions and needs, and politicians and media outlets use surveys to understand their constituencies.

In sum, the following are benefits of survey research:

- Cost-effectiveness
- Generalizability
- Reliability
- Versatility

Weaknesses of survey methods

As with all methods of data collection, survey research also comes with a few drawbacks. First, while one might argue that surveys are flexible in the sense that we can ask any number of questions on any number of topics in them, the fact that the survey researcher is generally stuck with a single instrument for collecting data, the questionnaire. Surveys are in many ways rather inflexible. Let's say you mail a survey out to 1,000 people and then discover, as responses start coming in, that your phrasing on a particular question seems to be confusing a number of respondents. At this stage, it's too late for a do-over or to change the question for the respondents who haven't yet returned their surveys. When conducting in-depth interviews, on the other hand, a researcher can provide respondents further explanation if they're confused by a question and can tweak their questions as they learn more about how respondents seem to understand them.

Depth can also be a problem with surveys. Survey questions are usually standardized; thus, it can be difficult to ask anything other than very general questions that a broad range of people will understand. Because of this, survey results may not be as valid as results obtained using methods of data collection that allow a researcher to more comprehensively examine whatever topic is being studied. Let's say, for example, that you want to learn something about voters' willingness to elect an African American president, as in our opening example in this chapter. General Social Survey respondents were asked, "If your party nominated an African American for president, would you vote for him if he were qualified for the job?" Respondents were then asked to respond either yes or no to the question. But what if someone's opinion was more complex than could be answered with a simple yes or no? What if, for example, a person was willing to vote for a qualified African American but not if he chose a vice president the respondent didn't like?

In sum, potential drawbacks to survey research include the following:

- Inflexibility
- Lack of depth