THE SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY AND THE OPINION POLLS

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Abstract. The sociological surveys are used to collect information about items in a population. Surveys of human populations and institutions are common in political polling, health, social science and marketing research. A survey may focus on opinions or factual data depending on its purpose, and many surveys involve administering questions to individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Thanks its advantages, the questionnaire is indispensable in the sociological survey. The advantages of this survey techniques include: its efficient way of collecting information from a large number of respondents, their flexibility in the sense that a wide range of information can be collected, their quality that it can be used to study attitudes, values, beliefs, and past behaviours or because they are standardized, they are relatively free from several types of errors. They are relatively easy to administrate and, finally, there is an economy in data collection due to the focus provided by standardized questions. Only questions of interest to the researcher are asked, recorded, codified, and analyzed. Disadvantages of the survey techniques include: their dependence on subjects motivation, honesty, memory, and ability to respond. Subjects may not be aware of their reasons for any given action. They may have forgotten their reasons. They may not be motivated to give accurate answers, in fact, they may be motivated to give answers that present themselves in a favourable light. Surveys are not appropriate for studying complex social phenomena. From the several techniques to realize a sociological survey (self-administrated questionnaires, telephone, mail) I choose the personal in-home survey with the respondent which had better chances of realization grace to its advantages: respondents are interviewed in person, in their homes (or at the front door), its high response rate 40% - 50%, the reality that it is suitable for long surveys (and ours was long), and because it is suitable for locations where telephone or mail are not developed (such as the Romanian rural areas). Opinion polls are surveys of opinion using sampling. The opinion polls are species of the sociological survey. (Rotariu, Iluț, 1999). They are usually designed to represent the opinions of a population by asking a small number of people a series of questions and then extrapolating the answers to the larger group. The first known example of an opinion poll was a local straw vote conducted by The Harrisburg Pennsylvanian in 1824. There are some differences between the opinion polls ant the sociological survey like: the opinion polls are focused on opinional aspects, on the problems that demand the public interest, they have a simple and descriptive character, they could be made in a short period of time and they belong to a democratic society. (Rotariu, Iluț, 1999). Nowadays, there are many polling organizations. The most famous is the Gallup poll, created by George Gallup, but other major polling organizations in the United States include: Quinnipiac Polls, (run by Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut, and started as a student project). The Pew
Charitable Trusts (conducts polls concentrating on media and political beliefs), the Harris Poll, Nielsen Ratings, virtually always for television or Zogby International (has been tracking public opinion since 1984). In the United Kingdom, the most notable "pollsters" are: MORI. This polling organization is notable for only selecting those who say that they are "likely" to vote. This has tended to favor the Conservative Party in recent years. YouGov, (an online pollster). NOP or Populus, official The Times pollster. In Romania, after the revolution of 1989 get started some polling organizations and today the most notable companies are: CURS, Gallup, IRSOP, IMAS, INSOMAR and MetroMediaTransilvania.

A questionnaire represents a type of sociological statistical survey handed out in paper form usually to a specific demographic to gather information in order to provide better service or goods. The questionnaire was invented by Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911). Questionnaires have advantages over some other types of surveys in that they are cheap, do not require as much effort from the questioner as verbal or telephone surveys, and often have standardized answers that make it simple to compile data. However, such standardized answers may frustrate users. Questionnaires are also limited by the fact that respondents must be able to read the questions and respond to them. Thus, for some demographic groups conducting a survey by questionnaire may not be practical. As a type of survey, questionnaires also have many of the same problems relating to question construction and wording that exist in other types of opinion polls. Questionnaires are frequently used in quantitative marketing research and social research in general. They are a valuable method of collecting a wide range of information from a large number of respondents. Good questionnaire construction is critical to the success of a survey. Inappropriate questions, incorrect ordering of questions, incorrect scaling, or bad questionnaire format can make the survey valueless.

The steps of a sociological survey design include: 1. Selecting the subject, 2. Formulating the hypothesis, 3. The literature search – (to see what have other people written about this topic), 4. Sampling – (selecting the people to be approached), 5. The questionnaire design (translating the broad objectives of the study into questions that will obtain the necessary information), 6. Fieldwork – (collection of data through questionnaire or interview), 7. Data processing – (coding and inputting the responses), 8. Statistical analyses, 9. Assembly of results and 10. Writing the results – (conclusions, interpretations and relating the findings to other research).

In our opinion, there are some conditions, which can determine a good questionnaire:

Using short sentences, the wording must be kept simple: no technical or specialized words. Writing style should be conversational, yet concise and accurate. The meaning should be clear.

Avoid ambiguous words and equivocal sentence structures. Avoid double negatives. Even single negatives should be reworded as positives.

Avoid biasing the responses. A biased question or questionnaire encourages respondents to answer one-way rather than another.

Ask one question at a time. We must avoid a complex of questions. If more than one question is hidden in a survey question, the researcher will not know which one the respondent is answering.

Avoid personal or intimate questions. Most people will not answer them.

Consider the respondent’s frame of reference. What is their background, and how will this effect their interpretation of the questions? Do respondents have enough information or expertise to answer the question?
Ask yourself if each question is really necessary. Unneeded questions are an expense to the researcher and an unwelcome imposition on the respondents. To answer this question, you must consider the objective(s) of the research.

What types of content will responses to the question yield? Will the question responses provide facts, beliefs, feelings, descriptions of past behaviour, or standards of action?

What type of scale, index, or typology should be used?

How should the questions be presented on the page (or computer screen)? How much white space? How many colours? Do you use pictures, charts, or other graphics? It should be colourful enough to gain and maintain respondent interest, but not so graphic as to distract from the questions.

Should questions be open-ended or should respondents’ answers be limited to a fixed set of responses?

What order should the questions be in? Is there a “natural” grouping to the questions? Will previous questions bias later questions?

Should the questions be numbered? Generally this is a good idea.

Are possible responses mutually exclusive? The respondent should not find themselves in more than one category, for example in both the “married” category and the “not living with spouse” category. Categories should not overlap.

Is the list of possible question responses inclusive? The respondent should not find themselves with no category that fits their situation.

Is the questionnaire going to be administered by research staff, or will it be self-administered by the respondents? Self administered questionnaires must give clear, detailed instructions.

There are also the techniques of survey: the direct (oral) survey, which could be face to face or by phone and the indirect survey through mail, e-mail, newspapers. (Rotariu, Iluț, 1999).

Unfortunately, in the process of the realization of a questionnaire could intervene some problems which can affect the research— the sampling error, the phenomena of the non-response, the response bias, or the coverage bias, like some errors made by the sentences wording.

Sampling error - The polls based on samples are subject to sampling error which reflects the effects of chance in the sampling process. The uncertainty is often expressed as a margin of error. The margin of error does not reflect other sources of error, such as measurement error. A poll with a random sample of 1,000 people has margin of sampling error of 3% for the estimated percentage of the whole population. A 3% margin of error means that 95% of the time the procedure used would give an estimate within 3% of the percentage to be estimated.

Non-response - If many persons refuse to answer the poll, poll samples may not be representative samples from a population. Because of this selection bias, the characteristics of those who agree to be interviewed may be markedly different from those who decline. That is, the actual sample is a biased version of the universe the pollster wants to analyze. In these cases, bias introduces new errors, one way or the other, that are in addition to errors caused by sample size. Error due to bias does not become smaller with larger sample sizes. If the people who refuse to answer, or are never reached, have the same characteristics as the people who do answer, the final results will be unbiased. If the people who do not answer have different opinions then there is bias in the results. In terms of election polls, studies suggest that bias effects are small, but each polling firm has its own formulas on how to adjust weights to minimize selection bias.
Response bias - Survey results may be affected by response bias, where the answers given by respondents do not reflect their true beliefs. This may be deliberately engineered by unscrupulous pollsters in a push poll, but more often is a result of the detailed wording or ordering of questions (see below). Respondents may deliberately try to manipulate the outcome of a poll by e.g. advocating a more extreme position than they actually hold in order to boost their side of the argument or give rapid and ill-considered answers in order to hasten the end of their questioning. Respondents may also feel under social pressure not to give an unpopular answer. If the results of surveys are widely publicized this effect may be magnified - the so-called spiral of silence.

Wording of questions - It is well established that the wording of the questions, the order in which they are asked and the number and form of alternative answers offered can influence results of polls. Thus comparisons between polls often boil down to the wording of the question. One way in which pollsters attempt to minimize this effect is to ask the same set of questions over time, in order to track changes in opinion.

Coverage bias - Another source of error is the use of samples that are not representative of the population as a consequence of the methodology used. For example, telephone sampling has a built-in error because in many times and places, those with telephones have generally been richer than those without. Alternately, in some places, many people have only mobile telephones. Because sociologists cannot call mobile phones, those individuals will never be included in the polling sample. If the subset of the population without cell phones differs markedly from the rest of the population, these differences can skew the results of the poll. Polling organizations have developed many weighting techniques to help overcome these deficiencies. Rotariu and Iluț (1999) determine other type of errors: the sampling error, the non-response, the errors determined by the construction of the questionnaire (the number and the order of the questions, the response form, the graphical construction of the questionnaire-or the coverage bias), the errors determined by the operators, and, finally, the errors which could be make by the respondents (the social desirability, the limits of the human memory or the wrong interpretation of the question). (Rotariu, Ilut, 1999). The questionnaires are an inexpensive way to gather data from a potentially large number of respondents. Often they are the only feasible way to reach a number of reviewers large enough to allow statistically analysis of the results. A well-designed questionnaire that is used effectively can gather information on both the overall performance of the test system as well as information on specific components of the system. If the questionnaire includes demographic questions on the participants, they can be used to correlate performance and satisfaction with the test system among different groups of users. It is important to remember that a questionnaire should be viewed as a multi-stage process beginning with definition of the aspects to be examined and ending with interpretation of the results. Every step needs to be designed carefully because the final results are only as good as the weakest link in the questionnaire process. Although questionnaires may be cheap to administer compared to other data collection methods, they are every bit as expensive in terms of design time and interpretation.

The steps required to design and administer a questionnaire include: defining the objectives of the survey, determining the sampling group, writing the questionnaire, administering the questionnaire, interpretation of the results. Questionnaires are quite flexible in what they can measure, however they are not equally suited to measuring all types of data. We can classify data in two ways, subjective vs. objective and quantitative vs. qualitative. When a questionnaire is administered, the researchers control over the environment will be somewhat limited. This is why questionnaires are inexpensive to administer. This loss of control means the validity of the results are more reliant on the honesty of the respondent.
Consequently, it is more difficult to claim complete objectivity with questionnaire data than with results of a tightly controlled lab test. For example, if a group of participants are asked on a questionnaire how long it took them to learn a particular function on a piece of software, it is likely that they will be biased towards themselves and answer, on average, with a lower than actual time. A more objective usability test of the same function with a similar group of participants may return a significantly higher learning time. More elaborate questionnaire design or administration may provide slightly better objective data, but the cost of such a questionnaire can be much higher and offset their economic advantage. In general, questionnaires are better suited to gathering reliable subjective measures, such as user satisfaction, of the system or interface in question. Questions may be designed to gather either qualitative or quantitative data. By their very nature, quantitative questions are more exact then qualitative. For example, the word "ugly" and "beautiful" can mean radically different things to different people. Any question must be carefully crafted, but in particular questions that assess a qualitative measure must be phrased to avoid ambiguity. Qualitative questions may also require more thought on the part of the participant and may cause them to become bored with the questionnaire sooner. In general, we can say that questionnaires can measure both qualitative and quantitative data well, but that qualitative questions require more care in design, administration, and interpretation. There is no all-encompassing rule for when to use a questionnaire. The choice will be made based on a variety of factors including the type of information to be gathered and the available resources for the experiment.

A questionnaire should be considered in the following circumstances:

1. When resources are limited. (the questionnaire can be quite inexpensive to administer. Sometimes preparation may be costly, any data collection scheme will have similar preparation expenses. Time is also an important resource that questionnaires can maximize. If a questionnaire is self-administering, such as an e-mail questionnaire, potentially several thousand people could respond in a few days.

2. When the privacy of the participants must be kept secret. (the questionnaires are easy to administer confidentially. Often confidentiality is the necessary to ensure participants will respond honestly if at all.

3. The importance of well-defined objectives cannot be over emphasized. A questionnaire that is written without a clear goal and purpose is inevitably going to overlook important issues and waste participants' time by asking useless questions. The questionnaire may lack a logical flow and thereby cause the participant to lose interest. Consequential, what useful data you may have collected could be further compromised. The problems of a poorly defined questionnaire do not end here, but continue on to the analysis stage. It is difficult to imagine identifying a problem and its cause, let alone its solution, from responses to broad and generalizing questions. An objective such as "to identify points of user dissatisfaction with the interface and how these negatively affect the software's performance" may sound clear and to the point, but it is not. The questionnaire designer must clarify what is meant by user dissatisfaction. Is this dissatisfaction with the learning of the software, the power of the software, or the ease of learning the software? Is it important for the users to learn the software quickly if they learn it well? How accurate must the measurements be? All of these issues must be narrowed and focused before a single question is formulated. A good rule of thumb is that if you are finding it difficult to write the questions, then you haven't spent enough time defining the objectives of the questionnaire. The questions should follow quite naturally from the objectives. When we want to write a questionnaire, we assume that we have already decided what kind of data we are to measure, formulated the objectives of the investigation, and decided on a participant group. Now we must compose our questions. If the
preceding steps have been faithfully executed, most of the questions will be on obvious topics. Most questionnaires, however, also gather demographic data on the participants. This is used to correlate response sets between different groups of people. It is important to see whether responses are consistent across groups. For example, if one group of participants is noticeably less satisfied with the test interface, it is likely that the interface was designed without fair consideration of this group's specific needs. This may signify the need for fundamental redesign of the interface. In addition, certain questions simply may only be applicable to certain kinds of users. For example, if one is asking the participants whether they find the new tutorial helpful, we do not want to include in our final tally the responses of experienced users who learned the system with an older tutorial. Typically, demographic data is collected at the beginning of the questionnaire, but such questions could be located anywhere or even scattered throughout the questionnaire. One obvious argument in favour of the beginning of the questionnaire is that normally background questions are easier to answer and can ease the respondent into the questionnaire. One does not want to put off the participant by jumping in to the most difficult questions. We are all familiar with such kinds of questions. It is important to ask only those background questions that are necessary. Do not ask income of the respondent unless there is at least some rational for suspecting a variance across income levels. There is often only a fine line between background and personal information. You do not want to cross over in to the personal realm unless absolutely necessary. If you need to solicit personal information, phrase the questions as unobtrusively as possible to avoid ruffling your participants and causing them to answer less than truthfully.

In general, there are two types of questions one will ask, open format or closed format. Open format questions are those that ask for unprompted opinions. In other words, there are no predetermined set of responses, and the participant is free to answer however he chooses. Open format questions are good for soliciting subjective data or when the range of responses is not tightly defined. An obvious advantage is that the variety of responses should be wider and more truly reflect the opinions of the respondents. This increases the likelihood of you receiving unexpected and insightful suggestions, for it is impossible to predict the full range of opinion. It is common for a questionnaire to end with an open format question asking the respondent for her unabashed ideas for changes or improvements. Open format questions have several disadvantages. First, their very nature requires them to be read individually. There is no way to automatically tabulate or perform statistical analysis on them. This is obviously more costly in both time and money, and may not be practical for lower budget or time sensitive evaluations. They are also open to the influence of the reader, for no two people will interpret an answer in precisely the same way. This conflict can be eliminated by using a single reader, but a large number of responses can make this impossible. Finally, open format questions require more thought and time on the part of the respondent. Closed format questions usually take the form of a multiple-choice question. There is no clear consensus on the number of options that should be given in a closed format question. Obviously, their needs to be sufficient choices to fully cover the range of answers but not so many that the distinction between them becomes blurred. Usually this translates into five to ten possible answers per questions. For questions that measure a single variable or opinion, such as ease of use or liability, over a complete range (easy to difficult, like to dislike), conventional wisdom says that there should be an odd number of alternatives. This allows a neutral or no opinion response. Other schools of thought contend that an even number of choices is best because it forces the respondent to get off the fence. This may induce the some inaccuracies for often the respondent may actually have no opinion. However, it is equally arguable that the neutral answer is over utilized, especially by bored questionnaire takers. For larger questionnaires
that test opinions on a very large number of items, such as a music test, it may be best to use an even number of choices to prevent large numbers of no-thought neutral answers. Closed format questions offer many advantages in time and money. By restricting the answer set, it is easy to calculate percentages and other hard statistical data over the whole group or over any subgroup of participants. Modern scanners and computers make it possible to administer, tabulate, and perform preliminary analysis in a matter of days. Closed format questions also make it easier to track opinion over time by administering the same questionnaire to different but similar participant groups at regular intervals. Finally closed format questions allow the researcher to filter out useless or extreme answers that might occur in an open format question.

Now that we've completed the questionnaire, we are still not ready to send it out. Just like any manufactured product, the questionnaire needs to go through quality testing. The major hurdle in questionnaire design is making it clear and understandable to all. Though you have taken great care to be clear and concise, it is still unreasonable to think that any one person can anticipate all the potential problems. Just as a usability test observes a test user with the actual interface, you must observe a few test questionnaire takers. We will then review the questionnaire with the test takers and discuss all points that were in any way confusing and work together to solve the problems. We will then produce a new questionnaire. Questionnaire design is a long process that demands careful attention. A questionnaire is a powerful evaluation tool and should not be taken lightly. Design begins with an understanding of the capabilities of a questionnaire and how they can help your research. If it is determined that a questionnaire is to be used, the greatest care goes into the planning of the objectives. Questionnaires are like any scientific experiment. One does not collect data and then see if they found something interesting. Questionnaires are versatile, allowing the collection of both subjective and objective data through the use of open or closed format questions. Modern computers have only made the task of collecting and extracting valuable material more efficient. However, a questionnaire is only as good as the questions it contains. There are many guidelines that must be met before you questionnaire can be considered a sound research tool. The majority deal with making the questionnaire understandable and free of bias. Mindful review and testing is necessary to weed out minor mistakes that can cause great changes in meaning and interpretation. When these guidelines are followed, the questionnaire becomes a powerful and economic evaluation tool.

Other situations:

Questions which rely on memory (Problems which tax the respondent's memory too much are likely to lead to non-response or inaccurate replies. For example "What did you have for lunch each day last year?")

Questions requiring prior knowledge (for example, "Which is your National Anthem?")

Sensitive questions looking for some personal details (health, age, religion, income).

Long questions (if the questions are too long and detailed, the respondent may get lost and the responses will relate only to the beginning or the end of the question).

Question order (our respondents may refuse to co-operate if our survey begins with awkward or embarrassing questions, people are more likely to give honest replies to personal questions if some rapport has been developed with the interviewer and for the above reasons, it is generally best to keep all questions dealing with demographic information (such as age) at the end of the questionnaire.

The Layout of the questionnaire (wanting an acceptable presentation, the author must print clearly (if computer printout is giving faint printouts, ask the IT staff whether a new
print cartridge can be installed), allow adequate space between questions so that he can write
down any comments made and writes the questions themselves in lower case).
The Pilot study (before deliver any questionnaire, we should "pilot" it (or to test it) to
to check that it is going to function correctly. There are a number of reasons why it is important
to pilot a questionnaire: to test how long it takes to complete, to check that the questions are
not ambiguous, to check that the instructions are clear and to allow you to eliminate questions
that do not have usable data. Ideally it should be piloted on a group similar to the one that will
form the population of your study. It is difficult to give an exact number for the pilot group,
but try to pilot on about 5-10% of our final sample number. The results from the pilot study,
however, should not be included with our final results. If respondents omit certain questions,
we should be able to find out why).

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