

AN UNDERSTANDING OF SURVEY AS A RESEARCH METHOD

V Nagaraja

Assistant professor

Department of Sociology

Government First Grade College, Sindhanur, Raichur district, Karnataka state, India-584128

E-mail Id: yemanna.nagaraj@gmail.com

Abstract: One of the predominant research techniques employed in sociology is the social survey. This approach entails soliciting responses from participants to straightforward, pre-formulated questions. Questionnaires serve as effective instruments for collecting quantitative (and sometimes qualitative) primary data from extensive groups of individuals. The survey method is widely recognized across various disciplines within the social sciences. Social survey research, encompassing both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, is particularly valuable for acquiring insights about large populations and assessing public attitudes and perspectives. The engagement of respondents and the transparency of researchers are critical factors in the success of survey research. This paper aims to assist emerging researchers in clearly differentiating the survey method from other methodologies utilized in social sciences research.

Keywords: Survey method, Social Research, Research techniques, Sociological survey, Interview, Questionnaire.

1.0 Introduction

When you find yourself seated and waiting at a train station or in a public space, it is not uncommon for someone to approach you with papers in hand, inquiring if you have a few moments to engage in conversation. This scenario often indicates that you are being invited to participate in a survey. Surveys represent one of the many methods available for conducting research and gathering information, and they offer a particularly straightforward approach. A survey can be described as a concise interview or discussion focused on a specific subject. However, the term 'survey' can be somewhat ambiguous, necessitating a clearer definition. It is frequently associated with the act of gathering information. For example, one might envision a researcher or a news anchor stating, "We conducted a survey, and the results are as follows." According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word 'survey' originates from the Anglo-French term 'surveer,' which means to look over or examine the condition, situation, or value of something; to question individuals to collect data for analyzing a particular aspect of a group or area; to ascertain and outline the form, magnitude, and location of; to consider comprehensively; and to inspect or scrutinize.

A social survey is defined as a systematic and organized process for gathering information about specific characteristics from a population, utilizing clearly established concepts, methods, and procedures. This information is then compiled into a coherent summary. Typically, a survey is initiated when there is a lack of data or when existing data is inadequate. The survey process involves several interconnected stages, including: setting objectives, selecting a survey frame, determining the sampling design, crafting the questionnaire, collecting and processing data, analyzing and sharing the findings, and documenting the entire survey process. By employing careful probability sampling, the resulting sample of respondents reflects the characteristics of the broader population being examined. Well-structured standardized questionnaires or interview schedules facilitate the collection of uniform data from all participants.

Definitions of Survey of Social Survey Method

A key aspect to consider in survey design is that data is gathered retrospectively, or ex post facto. This means that the respondents' attitudes towards female feticide were formed long before they visited the clinic or received the survey. Typically, the survey does not aim to assess behaviors or attitudes prior to the introduction of an independent variable. Rather, the independent variable, along with other naturally occurring factors such as age, socio-economic status, religiosity, and gender, can influence the dependent variable, which in this case is attitudes toward female feticide. The sociologist's role is to identify which variables are most strongly associated with the dependent variable and to elucidate the reasons for these correlations. This approach contrasts with experimental design, which, due to its stringent control over extraneous variables, seeks to establish causal relationships between

one independent variable and one dependent variable. In conclusion, survey research serves as a method for collecting, organizing, and analyzing data. Various techniques can be employed to gather relevant data, and in many instances, it may be beneficial to utilize a combination of research methods. Therefore, a survey can be defined as follows:

- ❖ Herbert Mc. Closky (1969) described a survey as a method where data are systematically gathered from a group or sample within that group through various means like direct interviews, phone calls, or written questionnaires.
- ❖ Platt (1972: 77) referred to it as a method for collecting data, involving the organized and structured questioning of a large number of individuals, for example, in public opinion polls, studies on consumer behavior, or population censuses.
- ❖ Kerlinger (1973) viewed survey research as a branch of social science that concentrates on studying individuals, their essential characteristics, beliefs, views, attitudes, motivations, and actions.
- ❖ Kraemer (1991) pointed out three key features of survey research. Firstly, it is employed to quantitatively explore specific aspects of a population, often looking into how variables are related. Secondly, the data collected for surveys are from individuals, making them subjective. Thirdly, survey research selects a subset of the population from which the findings can be applied to the larger group.
- ❖ Glasow (2005) starts with a statement on the purpose of a survey: [Survey research aims to]
- ❖ “to address questions that have been raised, to solve problems that have been identified or observed, to evaluate needs and establish objectives, to determine if specific goals have been achieved, to set standards for future comparisons, to analyze trends over time, and generally, to describe what exists, its quantity, and its context” (quoted in Isaac and Michael 1997: 136).
- ❖ Igo (2007: 5) notes that in the modern era, the public serves as both the subject and participants in survey research, as well as the audience for the findings.

3.0 Purpose of the survey research

Attewell and Rule (1991: 313) noted that traditional survey methods excel in areas where field research falls short. Surveys are effective for documenting norms, identifying outliers, and exploring relationships between variables within a sample. Jick (1983: 138) pointed out that survey research can enhance confidence in how results apply to larger populations. However, for surveys to effectively clarify causal relationships or provide meaningful descriptive statistics, they must include well-structured questions. Survey research is inherently focused on confirmation, requiring researchers to have a clear understanding of the expected outcomes prior to conducting the survey. Consequently, traditional survey research is primarily used for verification, often prioritizing quantitative methods and oversimplified experimentation while overlooking qualitative aspects, context, and the complexity of situations. This indicates that survey research can be effectively approached from both quantitative and qualitative angles. The divide between quantitative and qualitative approaches persists, as quantitative researchers tend to dismiss open-ended interviews as a legitimate survey method (Fowler 2009), while qualitative researchers may be surprised to find their interviews yield insights that exceed their sample scope. By familiarizing themselves with essential principles of survey research design, qualitative researchers could enhance the rigor and credibility of their projects, while quantitative researchers could enrich their findings by incorporating the perspectives of respondents.

4.0 Key characteristics of survey research

- Survey research is typically a quantitative method, but it can also incorporate qualitative elements, necessitating standardized information from both the subjects being studied and about them. These subjects may include individuals, groups, organizations, or communities.
- The selection of samples must be conducted without any bias or preference to ensure that the data collected accurately reflects the entire population.
- The primary method for gathering information is through structured, pre-defined questions designed to achieve the study's objectives.
- Interviews and questionnaires are the most common methods used for data collection.
- Surveys are extensively utilized in the social sciences, adhering to specific procedures grounded in survey science and the scientific method.

- Surveys stand out as one of the few techniques available for examining attitudes, values, beliefs, and motives.
- The survey process is intricately interconnected.

5.0 Advantages of Survey Research

- Faster data collection compared to other methods.
- Relatively inexpensive to conduct.
- Survey data can be highly accurate when sampling is probabilistic.
- Access to a broad range of participants.
- More ethical than experimental methods.
- Utilizes the methods, materials, and settings of real-life situations under investigation to ensure ecological validity.
- It is the primary method for gathering information about a respondent's past history.
- It is the only method capable of collecting generalized information from nearly any human population.

6.0 Disadvantages of Survey Research

- - Data may be superficial.
- - Can be costly to ensure representative data.
- - Data may lack internal validity.
- - Data may not have construct validity due to issues with self-reporting.
- - Data may lack external validity, often due to poor sampling or non-response bias.
- - Survey research is not suitable for studying large populations.
- - Critics argue that the method places individual respondents outside the social context, making the collection of individuals as a group difficult.
- - It relies on the direction of one's own perception and judgment.
- - Survey research is perceived as lacking dynamism.

7.0 Topics Appropriate for Survey

Surveys serve various purposes, including descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory functions. They are primarily utilized in research where individual participants are the units of analysis. While this methodology can also be applied to other units, such as groups or interactions, it is essential to include individual respondents or informants. For instance, a survey could focus on rural self-help groups (SHGs) as the unit of analysis, but the survey instruments must be distributed to the members of these groups. This method is particularly advantageous for researchers aiming to gather primary data from a population that is too extensive for direct observation. Additionally, surveys are effective tools for assessing the attitudes and perspectives of large populations. Public opinion polls, such as those conducted by AC Nielsen and Gallup, exemplify this application.

The survey methodology encompasses a range of techniques that prioritize quantitative analysis, wherein data from numerous organizations are collected and subsequently analyzed using statistical methods. By examining a representative sample of organizations, this approach aims to identify common relationships across them, thereby enabling the formulation of generalizable conclusions regarding the subject of investigation. However, it is important to note that the survey approach often captures only a momentary view of a situation, providing limited insight into the deeper significance of the data collected.

8.0 Types of Surveys

- a. Surveys can be classified into two main categories: based on the instruments used and the duration of the study. Instrumentation-based surveys include questionnaires and interviews. In contrast, surveys categorized by the time frame of data collection consist of cross-sectional surveys and longitudinal surveys.
- b. **According to Instrumentation :** In survey research, the tools employed can take the form of either questionnaires or interviews, which may be structured or unstructured. Questionnaires are typically paper-based instruments that respondents fill out independently. In contrast, interviews involve the interviewer gathering information based on the respondent's verbal answers. The distinction between a questionnaire and an interview can sometimes be unclear. For example, many assume that questionnaires exclusively feature short, closed-ended questions, while interviews consist solely of broad, open-ended inquiries.

However, it is common to encounter questionnaires that include open-ended questions, albeit usually more concise than those found in interviews, and interviews that incorporate a range of closed-ended questions as well. Survey research has undergone significant transformation over the past decade. Automated telephone surveys utilizing random dialing techniques have emerged, alongside computerized kiosks in public areas that facilitate participant feedback. Additionally, a new form of group interview has developed, known as focus group methodology. Moreover, there is a growing trend of integrating survey research closely with service delivery.

- c. **Questionnaires:** A questionnaire is typically a paper-based tool used to collect information from respondents. It often consists of closed-ended questions that provide specific response options. However, some questionnaires incorporate open-ended questions to gain deeper insights into respondents' thoughts. Currently, questionnaires are employed in various survey methodologies based on their administration style. These include self-administered, group-administered, and household drop-off methods. Among these, the self-administered approach, commonly referred to as mail surveys, is frequently favored by researchers today. Additionally, many questionnaires are now distributed online through web surveys. The group-administered questionnaire involves gathering a sample of respondents in one location to answer a predetermined set of questions. This method was traditionally preferred for its convenience, allowing researchers to distribute questionnaires to attendees and ensuring a higher response rate. Respondents could seek clarification on any unclear questions, and it was often easier to assemble groups in organizational settings, such as colleges or NGOs. In this format, each participant receives a questionnaire to complete on-site. Another less common method is the household drop-off survey, where researchers visit respondents' homes or businesses to deliver the questionnaire. In some instances, respondents may be asked to return the completed survey by mail, or the researcher may return to collect it. This method aims to combine the benefits of mail surveys and group-administered questionnaires, allowing respondents to complete the survey privately and at their convenience.
- d. **Interviews :** This type of survey can take various forms, ranging from highly structured interviews to completely open-ended or unstructured formats (for a detailed discussion on interviews, refer to Module RMS 12). In these interviews, the interviewer may adapt their questioning style to gain a deeper insight into the topics being explored. Compared to other survey methods, interviews tend to be more personal and investigative. In a personal interview, the interviewer engages directly with the respondent, allowing for the opportunity to ask probing or follow-up questions, which is not possible in mail surveys. This format is generally more comfortable for respondents, particularly when seeking their opinions or impressions. The interviewer acts as an integral part of the measurement process and must be well-trained to handle various situations that may arise. While questionnaires limit the ability to ask follow-up questions, interviews provide that flexibility. An interview involves two parties: the researcher as the interviewer and the respondent as the interviewee. Several survey methods incorporate interviews, including personal or face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, and, more recently, online interviews. Structured interviews yield consistent information, ensuring data comparability. Interviewing is both an art and a science, with structured interviews requiring fewer skills than unstructured ones. It is essential to foster a friendly atmosphere of trust and confidence, allowing respondents to feel comfortable during the conversation. The interviewer should (i) comprehend the respondent's profile, including their needs, concerns, and educational background; (ii) frame questions in a way that is clear and encourages satisfactory responses; (iii) start with simpler questions before progressing to more complex ones; and (iv) maintain a friendly, polite, informal, and impartial demeanor to avoid embarrassing the respondents. (v) ensures that the respondent remains focused and minimizes off-topic discussions; and (vi) poses only a single question at a time.
- e. **Other methods used for data collection in survey research:**
 - i. **Panel Survey:** Panel surveys represent a method for the direct extension of questionnaire or interview-based research. In this approach, data is gathered from the same individuals at multiple time intervals. Such data collection allows for the testing of causal hypotheses in at least two distinct manners. Firstly, researchers can analyze whether changes at the individual level in an independent variable align with changes in a dependent variable over the same timeframe. Secondly, it is possible to evaluate if variations in a dependent variable over time can be forecasted by earlier levels of an independent variable. An illustrative application of this methodology was found in a study examining the projection hypothesis, a long-standing concept in social psychology. This hypothesis, grounded in cognitive consistency theories, suggests that individuals may exaggerate their agreement with those they favor and their disagreement with those they do not. However, panel surveys also present certain challenges. While individuals may readily agree to participate in a single cross-sectional survey, fewer may be inclined to engage in multiple interviews. Additionally, as more waves of data collection occur, it becomes progressively challenging to

track down respondents for re-interviews due to factors such as relocation or mortality. This can jeopardize the representativeness of the panel survey samples, particularly if the characteristics of those who continue to participate differ significantly from those who initially took part but opted out of subsequent waves (Visser et al. 2000).

- ii. **Observation Method:** This method is particularly relevant in research associated with behavioral sciences. While we all engage in informal observation of our surroundings, such observations lack scientific rigor unless we consider specific factors: (i) what aspects should be observed; (ii) the method of recording these observations; and (iii) the measures taken to ensure the accuracy of the observations (for a comprehensive discussion on observation, refer to Module RMS 13). In the observation method, the researcher gathers information through direct observation without soliciting responses from participants. The data collected pertains to current behaviors and is not influenced by past actions or future intentions and attitudes of the subjects. Observations can be categorized into two types: Controlled and Uncontrolled. Uncontrolled observation occurs in a natural environment, while controlled observation is conducted according to predetermined plans and experimental protocols. The primary aim of observation is to capture an authentic representation of life and individuals.

9.0 Conclusion

Social science research methodology heavily relies on survey methods due to their ability to gather extensive information from a large population. This approach can be tailored to collect personal and social data, including beliefs and attitudes. However, some critics argue that survey research may not be suitable for studying large groups. Effective survey research necessitates a significant level of knowledge, experience, and expertise from the researcher, particularly in areas such as sampling techniques, questionnaire design, interviewing skills, data tabulation, analysis, and report writing. The valuable contributions of psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, political scientists, and statisticians to the development of survey research methods are noteworthy.

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