Cultural Determinants of Socially Desirable Distortion in Computer Based Data Collection: A Multicultural Investigation

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ABSTRACT

Internet-based surveys have emerged as a popular data collection method for researchers, enabling the collection of responses from participants at multiple sites, including in other countries. Oftentimes, pooled data is analyzed without regard to understanding the potential downsides. Given that the results from any survey hinge on the validity of the responses collected, it is important to examine what influence the data collection method and cultural differences might have. In this study, the authors investigate the effects that espoused national culture and data collection method have on confidentiality concerns and socially desirable reporting. Results indicate that data collection mode and espoused power distance influence confidentiality concerns, while data collection mode and collectivism influence socially desirable distortion.

Keywords: Confidentiality Concerns, Data Collection, Espoused National Culture, Internet-Based Surveys, Research Methodologies, Socially Desirable Reporting

INTRODUCTION

In the context of social science research, a great deal of data is collected from human subjects, by asking them questions (Fisher, 1993; Peterson & Kerin, 1981). Data collection for hypothesis testing is vital to the development and growth of theoretical knowledge (Dubin, 1978). Traditional methods of data collection include paper-based surveys and structured interviews. Since the emergence of Internet-based surveys in 1994 (Kehoe & Pitkow, 1996), behavioral researchers have adopted this method for data collection with increasing frequency (Buchanan & Smith, 1999; Sheehan & Hoy, 1999; Sills & Song, 2002). However, researchers often assume that their subjects will respond in the same manner regardless of the mode of data collection (Denscombe, 2006).

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This assumption may be tenuous because in order to glean meaningful insights from these data, researchers must assume that the subjects have answered the questions that they were presented with honestly. Intentional or unintentional, errors in measurement can result in a multitude of internal validity concerns (King & Bruner, 2000). Past studies suggest that the data collection method does influence survey responses (Martin & Nago, 1989; Potosky & Bobko, 1997; Stanton, 1998). Furthermore, as online surveys allow researchers to capture data from around the globe, it is important to understand how individual differences, such as espoused national culture, may influence participants’ responses. Therefore, both how the data is collected and whom the data is collected from are important.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, we review the literature to highlight data collection mode (paper versus online surveys) and espoused national culture concerns when it comes to measurement and propose a research model. Next, based on a cross-cultural sample of participants from the United States and China, we examine the influences of data collection mode and espoused natural culture on socially desirable distortion and confidentiality concerns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before developing the hypotheses that will address our research question, we first review relevant literature on data collection modes, espoused national culture, confidentiality concerns and socially desirable reporting.

Data Collection Mode

Traditionally, self-administered paper-based surveys have been the mode of choice among social science researchers (Suchman & Jordan, 1990). As implied by the name, subjects are given a pen, and asked to respond to questions written on a piece of paper. A researcher must collect these answers, and if he/she intends to analyze the data from these surveys statistically, enter the responses into a computer.

Paper-based surveys have several advantages over other data collection modes. For example, they are cheaper, less time consuming and more standardized across subjects than face-to-face interviews. However, paper-based surveys also suffer several disadvantages. While paper based surveys can ask open ended questions, probing questions are more difficult to ask, as incomplete responses are difficult to interpret without further elaboration. Also, if the subject is unable to understand a question, it is more difficult for them to seek clarification than face-to-face data surveys, where an interviewer is present. Finally, loafing can be a concern with paper-based surveys as it is easier for subjects to skip questions or provide responses without reading the questions when no human proctor is present.

The idea of using a computer to administer a survey was originally suggested by Smith (1963). Today, Internet-based surveys are an increasingly popular data collection mode (Dwight & Feigelson, 2000). Generally, questions are presented to a subject using a web browser to respond. Subjects are mostly limited to radio buttons, check boxes and text boxes to provide their answers.

Customizable Internet-based surveys have several advantages over paper-based surveys. For example, the software can handle complex branching patterns, like automatically skipping ahead to a different question based upon a past response. Also, if programmed correctly, the survey can encourage users to address data inconsistencies at the point of data entry (Fowler, 2002). Internet-based surveys can also lower data collection costs and speed up the time for data analysis, as the software can be set to code responses automatically (Sills & Song, 2002).

With the widespread adoption of the Internet, researchers found that they could overcome geographical distances and include samples from beyond national boundaries. There are issues to consider however. A fair criticism of Internet-based surveys is that survey design has
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