Chapter 20
Addressing Survey Research

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ABSTRACT
Survey research is a mainstay of social research. Both cost effective and time efficient, this method of research is commonly used for the purposes of gaining insight into the attitudes, thoughts, and opinions of populations. There are several types of survey research designs and data collection instruments giving the researchers the flexibility to determine which methods will work best for their own particular study. Regardless of the method, the researcher must carefully select an exciting instrument or construct the data collection instrument, as this is the key to a successful survey research study. Despite some criticisms, survey research remains a highly used research method but with the advent of the digital age, the face of survey research is beginning to change. This chapter defines survey research, outlines the basic structure for conducting such research, identifies some of the major challenges surrounding survey research, and provides some recommendations. In discussing the future of survey research, the authors place emphasis on big data and social media as two strong digital forces influencing survey research.

INTRODUCTION
Survey research can be used for “monitoring important trends in society, testing our theoretical understanding of social processes, providing information to firms through market research, guiding politicians through polling of public opinion on key political issues and strategies, and providing key indicators of what is going on in our society” (Berends, 2006, p. 623).

Survey research is valuable in both small and large scale research designs. It is frequently used in many disciplines where social research is important. For example, in education setting where survey methods provide constructive feedback to educational administrators regarding teacher job satisfaction,
burnout, educational climate, parental attitudes towards school board decisions, student opinions regarding class options, and much more useful information. In doing so, changes can be made and ideas can be adapted to increase the success of schools and educational programs. In the context of globalization and fierce competition among organizations (be they education, entertainment or industry), insights into client perceptions, attitudes, needs and satisfaction are valuable, and survey research is being used more extensively than ever. For example, a simple task such as purchasing an item online is invariably accompanied by a survey of customer satisfaction and shopping experience. Survey research though it has its critics, it seems is destined to remain a popular research tool for some time to come.

There are three facets to the discussion of survey research in the present chapter. Firstly, we to provide a primer on survey research. We identify the dimensions of survey research and to highlight considerations that must be taken into account in order for the approach to be a practical and effective method of data exploration. Specifically, this chapter will provide information regarding the basic components of survey research, including the steps involved in conducting this type of research. Secondly, we discuss the controversies and issues surrounding survey research, as well as solutions and recommendations to counter such issues. Thirdly, we turn to discuss trends and technologies driving the future of survey research with particular emphasis on two dominant features of the digital landscape: big data and social media.

Background of Survey Research

What Is Survey Research?

Ideal for use in education, business and other contexts where people’s views are important, survey research is used to gather information about population groups to “learn about their characteristics, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 183). This is done by administering a questionnaire, either written or orally, to a group of respondents, and the responses to the questions form the data for the study (Berends, 2006; Best & Kahn, 2003; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Mertler & Charles, 2008; Polit & Beck, 2006). Gay et al. (2009) define the questionnaire, or survey, as “an instrument to collect data that describes one or more characteristics of a specific population” (p. 175). While Gay et al.’s definition of a survey is sufficient explanation of the tool, the conceptualization of survey research by Murphy, Hill and Dean (Social media, sociality and survey research., 2014, p. 1) captures beautifully the true essence of survey research: “Conducting survey research is at its core, a social interaction between a researcher and a (potential) respondent – a “conversation with a purpose”.

Some researchers may be able to work with the entire population, which is referred to as a census (Berends, 2006; Gay et al.; Mertler & Charles, 2008). However, most survey research is conducted with a sample of respondents from the target population. If proper sampling techniques are employed, the researcher can generalize the attitudes and ideas from the sample to the larger population (Fraenkel & Wallen; Gay et al.; Leedy & Ormrod; McMillan & Schumacher).

Why Do We Conduct Survey Research?

To put it succinctly, survey research is used because it is a versatile way of providing insights into the human condition, and while it does not provide causal information, it can provide rich information that serves as a platform for action. The survey researcher does not manipulate variables (Burns & Grove,
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