Surveying the social world
PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE IN SURVEY RESEARCH

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This Understanding Social Research series is designed to help students to understand how social research is carried out and to appreciate a variety of issues in social research methodology. It is designed to address the needs of students taking degree programmes in areas such as sociology, social policy, psychology, communication studies, cultural studies, human geography, political science, criminology and organization studies and who are required to take modules in social research methods. It is also designed to meet the needs of students who need to carry out a research project as part of their degree requirements. Postgraduate research students and novice researchers will find the books equally helpful.

The series is concerned to help readers to ‘understand’ social research methods and issues. This will mean developing an appreciation of the pleasures and frustrations of social research, an understanding of how to implement certain techniques, and an awareness of key areas of debate. The relative emphasis on these different features will vary from book to book, but in each one the aim will be to see the method or issue from the position of a practising researcher and not simply to present a manual of ‘how to’ steps. In the process, the series will contain coverage of the major methods of social research and will address a variety of issues and debates. Each book in the series is written by a practising researcher who has experience of the techniques or debates that he or she is addressing. Authors are encouraged to draw on their own experiences and inside knowledge.
Surveying the social world

This new book on surveys by Alan Aldridge and Ken Levine is very much in tune with the aims of the series. It is concerned to bring out not just the principles that are involved in survey research but also a host of practical issues. However, in survey research there are different contexts to what might be meant by a term like 'practical issues'. Quite rightly, Aldridge and Levine refer quite often to large, frequently complex exercises in survey research to illustrate some of their main points. But for many, if not most, readers of this book such a context is very far from the reality they will be facing if they wish to carry out a social survey. It is this second scenario with which this book is largely concerned. Students, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, are likely to have limited resources and invariably limited time at their disposal. Texts on survey research that focus primarily on large, lavishly funded national surveys are hardly pertinent to such a situation. Aldridge and Levine's book is full of advice on how to devise survey research in the kind of environment that typically confronts a student: namely, having a fairly tightly focused set of research questions that are to be answered using a survey approach, but with limited resources.

Aldridge and Levine bring their experience of conducting a relatively small-scale survey on a highly focused topic - travel to work decisions and behaviour of staff and students at their university - to put some flesh on the bones of the principles of survey research. They bring out the kinds of issue that need to be taken into account when conducting such research. In the process, they identify crucial decisions about the conduct of surveys: what kind of sample to select, whether to interview or to use a self-completion questionnaire, how to design survey questions, and so on. In addition, they address various hardware and software issues and provide a helpful overview of approaches to quantitative data analysis.

But it is the sense of being in on the reality of what it is like to do a survey that distinguishes this book from others on the survey approach and that will prove indispensable to future survey researchers. Social surveys are rarely if ever perfect. However, there are numerous traps that can ensnare the unwary and this book will alert readers to ways of avoiding them, as well as introducing the realities of survey research.

Alan Bryman
In an era in which ‘social inclusion’, ‘active citizenship’ and ‘customer-centred’ feature among the popular buzz words, it is not surprising that an increasing number of individuals and institutions are attracted to the social survey as a way of consulting interest groups, audiences and clients. Surveys abound, but many of the people who will carry them out lack any formal training in social research methods and need guidance about principles as well as practical know-how.

There is no shortage of existing textbooks that deal with social surveys and some of them have established worthy reputations. However, for the purposes of the non-professional people mentioned above and also for students being introduced systematically to the method for the first time, many existing works have one or both of two drawbacks. First, they fail to distinguish between the possibilities open to an individual or small group conducting a modest survey on a limited budget, and what is possible for a research centre commanding a sizeable team sustained on the basis of a substantial research grant. A variety of strategies and techniques are ruled out if the resources and staff to implement them are lacking, and we have tried to signal throughout what is feasible in small-scale and solo projects. Second, some textbooks make the successful completion of a social survey appear extraordinarily unlikely. There is a tendency to counsel perfection and to appeal to ideals without practical workarounds being offered. There seem to be so many traps, hazards and obstacles that only an Indiana Jones,
propelled by massive determination and superhuman powers of foresight, could overcome them all. While it is true that there are a variety of factors that have to be entertained, we set out to reassure readers that surveys can indeed be conducted by ordinary mortals. We have not neglected the problems and pitfalls but we have tried to offer alternatives and remedies wherever possible. Beyond that, we have sought to strike a positive note and to offer reassurance at the few points it is likely to be needed.

Part of the editorial brief we were given was to avoid a heavily statistical approach. The analysis of survey data, even for small-scale investigations, necessarily involves the selection and use of statistical tools, so this is not an easy task. We have concentrated on the general role played within surveys by descriptive and inferential statistics, seeking to maintain a focus on how they fit in with the other dimensions of survey analysis and referring readers to other sources for the step-by-step detail of procedures.

Both of the authors have been associated with the Survey Unit at the University of Nottingham, UK, and one of the investigations it conducted, the Travel Survey, is used as a running example throughout the book. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the present and past staff of the Unit, Jan Wagstaff, Beth Rogers, Nerys Anthony, Dr Nicola Hendey, Helen Foster and Becky Nunn for their hard work and good humour in innumerable projects. The undergraduates from the School of Sociology and Social Policy (formerly the School of Social Studies), together with postgraduates from various departments taking the Quantitative Methods module, also deserve our thanks. They have confirmed once again that teaching and learning are always two-way processes. We acknowledge the contribution of Sue Parker in the School of Sociology and Social Policy, an ever-helpful source of support and encouragement to student learning in modules involving surveys and statistics. Our thanks are due to Paddy Riley of Academic Computing Services, University of Nottingham, for the benefit over many years of his expertise with SPSS and other computer packages. Finally, we are indebted to Professor Alan Bryman, the series editor, for his many helpful suggestions. All of the above remain entirely blameless for any errors of omission or commission.
Our approach in this book

Every book on social surveys is trying to be helpful. Despite the good intentions, it is all too easy to be unrealistic and off-putting. Why is this? We suggest the following reasons:

- Checklists of do's and don'ts: The don'ts always seem to outnumber the do's. Survey research sounds like a minefield.
- Counsels of perfection: Any failure to abide by the do's and don'ts appears
to invalidate the whole survey. Many readers sense they will never match up to this ideal, so why bother trying?

- Too much technique, not enough imagination: The design and analysis of surveys involves technicalities – hence the do’s and don’ts. But if that were all there is to it, it would be very dull. Luckily, it does not have to be like that. Successful surveys involve an exercise of the sociological imagination, as well as skilful use of techniques. Survey research is a craft, like throwing a pot, and brings much the same satisfactions (and frustrations).
- Statistics: Statistical analysis is a powerful instrument, and it is foolish to attack it. But statistics are tools, not an end in themselves. The hard part is usually not the statistics, but the sociological imagination.

If these are the problems with books on social surveys, how have we dealt with them?

Using and extended example

We use a recent and real life example of a survey, which we refer to throughout the book, to illustrate the practical and theoretical issues which arise at each stage. Thus throughout you will find discussions of the Travel Survey. The purpose is to examine the planning and execution of a single real survey that you can follow step by step to see how the different aspects and activities that make up a social survey fit together. Many chapters contain a box focusing on features of the Travel Survey relevant to the topics dealt with in that chapter. The Travel Survey questionnaires are reproduced in Appendix 1.

Box 1.1 The Travel Survey

The Travel Survey was commissioned from the Survey Unit at the University of Nottingham, UK, early in 1998 by the administrative department responsible for buildings, parking and transport facilities. They needed information on the commuting habits of students and staff, so that they could fulfil the commitments they had given to the local authority to minimize the traffic congestion likely to be caused by the construction of a new satellite campus about half a mile from the main site. They also wanted to preserve the parkland character of the main campus by encouraging ‘environmentally friendly’ forms of commuting such as buses and bicycling.

The survey was intended to generate detailed data on commuting patterns and related attitudes among staff and students that would enable transport consultants to advise the university on a variety of ‘green’ policies. Thus its objective was primarily descriptive rather than analytic: the task was to describe variations in commuting patterns rather than to offer explanations of them.
The sociological imagination

Like all methods of social research, surveys call for an exercise of the sociological imagination. In surveys, as in fieldwork, we have to ‘take the role of the other’ (George Herbert Mead’s phrase); that is, we make an imaginative leap into the roles of our respondents, trying to get inside their experiences, their private troubles, their joys and aspirations, and their ways of thought and expression. We have to be sensitive to nuances of language, to the wider culture, and often to the organizational and occupational setting. We have to avoid stereotypes and stereotyped thinking.

Box 1.2 The sociological imagination: sensitive topics

In the 1960s, a team of sociologists at the University of Cambridge, UK conducted an investigation into the values, beliefs and social activities of relatively well paid working-class people: the Affluent Worker studies. As part of their survey, they asked a sample of respondents to keep a diary logging their weekly social and leisure activities. Some respondents were embarrassed that most of their leisure time was spent on everyday activities like mowing the lawn, cleaning the car and going shopping. They were worried that the researchers would think their lives were dull – an example of the social desirability* problem. This example reminds us to be imaginative about what the potentially sensitive topics are likely to be. Looking at it positively, sensitive issues also tend to be the most interesting sociologically and the most important socially.

Being realistic

Every researcher knows that compromises have to be made and desirable things left undone. We often have the simple choice: make the best of it, or do nothing.

Box 1.3 Being realistic: no time to do a pilot

In 1993, Aldridge was approached by a senior administrator at the University of Nottingham, UK. The university’s Management Group was debating whether or not to build a day nursery on campus for the children of students and staff. They were not sure what the level and pattern of

* The first use of a term included in the glossary is printed in bold.
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demand would be. Could Aldridge help by conducting a survey of staff and mature students?

This was half-way through October. The Vice-Chancellor wanted a report and recommendations by mid-December. After discussion, it was agreed that this could be put back to early January at the latest.

Strictly, Aldridge did not have the time and resources to do the survey ‘properly’, in textbook fashion. But it seemed a very important project. Better that the university have some objective information to go on than none at all. Aldridge therefore went ahead, but had to make some compromises. He decided that there was no time to conduct a pilot survey to test the question wording for all the problems that can arise. All surveys are supposed to be carefully piloted; to omit this is risky. (It is not, despite the impression sometimes given, unethical.) Aldridge decided to do the following:

• undertake crash reading about nursery provision, to identify the key issues (Aldridge knew very little about the topic);
• show the draft questionnaire to a few friends and colleagues, asking them to be extremely critical and pull no punches;
• keep the questionnaire as simple as possible, covering only the key issues and avoiding anything fancy;
• spend a lot of time on the covering letter, to try to ensure that the questionnaire would be well received by a very diverse group of respondents: not just academic staff and students, but secretaries, porters, cleaners, ground staff and so on; not just people with infant children, but childless people, childfree people, and people who would have been desperate for a nursery but for whom it was too late because their children were grown up;
• dispense with a follow-up (reminder) letter, even though it would certainly have boosted the response rate;
• keep the analysis straightforward and the final report short and to the point.

Happily, it turned out well. The response rate was reasonable, respondents were very cooperative, and the report was written on time. The Vice-Chancellor was pleased. And the university decided to build the nursery.

Our readers’ experience and resources

We are writing mainly for readers who have had very little experience if any of doing a survey. Some readers will have taken part in a survey as a respondent - which may or may not have been a stimulating experience.

We are also assuming that, in most cases, the sort of survey the reader will be likely to undertake, at least to begin with, will be a relatively small-scale
one with limited resources. These can be very worthwhile – size is not the most important thing. The reader may well be working solo or, if not, in a small team. The reader may be a student, or someone wanting to do a survey on behalf of an organization. Although our book does sometimes refer to large-scale surveys like the General Household Survey or the Census, we are not primarily writing about those. After all, if you are working on such a survey you will receive training and be told what to do!

Hints and examples

Each survey is unique. Therefore, lists of do’s and don’ts are too inflexible. A solution in one survey may not work in another. We provide general hints, not inflexible rules. We also give real examples of how we have tried to solve problems in our own research. We use our Travel Survey for the University of Nottingham as an extended example running throughout the book.

Statistics

Our aim is to introduce the broad principles of statistical analysis, to clarify which statistics are appropriate when, and to indicate what statistics can and cannot do. We provide suggestions for further reading on the technical aspects.

What is a survey?

A social survey is a type of research strategy. By this we mean that it involves an overall decision – a strategic decision – about the way to set about gathering and analysing data.

The strategy involved in a survey is that we collect the same information about all the cases in a sample. Usually, the cases are individual people, and among other things we ask all of them the same questions. This is the type of survey we concentrate on in this book.

The items of information we gather from our respondents are the variables. Variables can be classified into three broad types, depending on the type of information they provide:

- attributes – that is, characteristics such as age, sex, marital status, previous education
- behaviour – questions such as what? when? how often? (if at all)
- opinions, beliefs, preferences, attitudes – questions on these four characteristics are probing the respondent’s point of view.

We shall examine the nature of variables more fully in Chapter 2. For the moment, the key point is that a survey aims to gather standard information in respect of the same variables for everyone in the sample.
Methods of data collection in surveys

Social surveys employ a variety of methods to gather information, such as questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews and observation.

Questionnaires

These are forms containing sets of questions which the respondent completes and returns to the researcher. One main type is the postal (mail) questionnaire, which is sent and returned through the post. Questionnaires may also be completed and returned on the spot, for example in a classroom or dentist’s waiting-room. The rapid growth of email has opened up another interesting possibility for the distribution and return of questionnaires.

Face-to-face interviews

In this book we do not refer to questionnaires when talking about interviews. Rather, we say that the interviewer has an interview schedule (for use in a structured interview) or an interview guide (for use in an unstructured or semi-structured interview). (Some sociologists use ‘questionnaire’ more broadly, to include interview schedules. When they want to make the distinction, they use the term self-completion questionnaire.)

Face-to-face interviews can be classified into three types: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured.

1 In a structured interview, the questions and the question order are pre-set. The interviewer aims to be in control of the interaction, and the respondent is just that – someone who responds to questions that are put to him or her. The interview schedule is like a questionnaire, except it is read out and filled in by the interviewer.

2 In unstructured interviews, neither the questions nor the question order are predetermined. Unstructured interviews are exploratory, and in principle non-directive: it is more like a focused conversation. The aim is to enable people to express themselves in their own words, highlighting their own feelings, preferences and priorities rather than those of the researcher. Although there is no interview schedule the interviewer may well have an interview guide, consisting of a set of prompts to remind them what main topics need to be covered.

3 A semi-structured interview is one which aims to have the best of both worlds. Parts of the interview are structured, with a set of questions directed in sequence to the respondent, while other parts of the interview are relatively unstructured explorations of particular or general issues.

Unstructured interviews are widely used in therapy and counselling. They
clearly do not meet the requirement, intrinsic to the survey method, that standardized information is gathered systematically from all respondents. A survey, by definition, cannot be wholly based on unstructured interviews. This does not mean that survey researchers and non-directive interviewers have to be at loggerheads. Throughout this book we point to the advantages of multi-method research strategies. Questionnaires, unstructured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, diaries: all these methods, and others besides, can be combined in imaginative and innovative ways.

Telephone interviews
The nature of telephone interactions with strangers implies that telephone interviews are invariably of the structured variety.

Observation
Examples of surveys based on observation are traffic censuses, and studies of pedestrian flows through city centres (very useful commercially to anyone wanting to know where to set up shop).

Surveys and other research strategies
The survey is one of the three broad research strategies available in social research. The others are the experiment and the case study.

The experiment
Within the social sciences, experiments have tended to be conducted almost exclusively by psychologists. Some experiments are carried out in the laboratory, others in natural settings, ‘in the field’ - though it is far harder for field experiments in the social sciences to match the ideal type of the so-called ‘true’ experimental design. Amid the wide variety of types of experimental design we can distinguish the following key features.

Experiments are usually designed to test hypotheses (tentative explanations and predictions) about the causal relations between variables. The researcher carefully controls the independent variables (the potential causes) in order to measure their impact on the dependent variables, the effects. The people taking part in the experiment, the subjects, are divided into two or more groups, on the basis of a random assignment of individuals to groups. These groups are exposed to different experimental treatments. Statistical tests are used to determine the extent to which any differences in the measurement of outcomes (dependent variables) are due to each independent variable.

In an experiment, the researcher deliberately introduces a difference
between the people taking part. For example, take a clinical trial in which some subjects receive a new drug designed to relieve headaches, while others receive no treatment at all. Very often, no treatment means being given a placebo – a harmless preparation which has no medical value or pharmacological effects. At the outset, each subject stands an equal chance of being in the experimental group receiving the drug or in a control group receiving no treatment or the placebo.

Clearly, it would be hopeless if all the men were put into one group and all the women into the other, because then we would not know whether differences in outcome were due to the drug or to the sex of the participant. Random assignment of individuals to groups is a statistically derived technique for addressing the problem that other independent variables, in this example the subject’s sex, might be causing the differences in the dependent variables, in this example headache relief.

Equally clearly, it would be no good if subjects knew whether they were receiving a drug or a placebo. If they did know, it might well affect their response to the treatment, thereby invalidating the experiment. For this reason, active placebos are sometimes used – that is, placebos which mimic the side-effects of the drug but without its hypothesized therapeutic benefits. Very often, it is also desirable that the researchers themselves do not know, at the time they are administering a treatment, whether it is a drug or a placebo. If they did know, they might unintentionally communicate their feelings and expectations to their subjects, subtly implying that the drug would work whereas the placebo would not. An experiment or clinical trial in which neither the subjects nor the researchers know, during the experiment, to which group the subjects have been assigned, is known as a double blind procedure.

In surveys, by contrast, the researcher is dealing with differences between respondents that are given, not experimentally created. Men and women, smokers, people who have given up smoking and people who have never smoked, car drivers, motorcyclists, cyclists and pedestrians: we do not experimentally create these differences, our respondents present them to us.

The case study

As the name implies, a case study involves an in-depth investigation into a particular example of a social phenomenon or institution. Two areas of sociology in which case studies have played a prominent part are the sociology of education, where detailed work has focused on social interactions in classrooms, staffrooms, playgrounds and so on, and the sociology of religion, where studies have focused on minority religious movements such as the Moonies (Barker 1984), examining, for example, the relationship between Moon and his followers, and probing the question, have members exercised choice or are they brainwashed?
Case studies typically involve a wide range of research techniques, including observation, participant observation, interviews, documentary analysis, and asking people to keep a diary. They may also involve some survey work - case studies and surveys are not incompatible.

**The success of the survey**

Modern survey research is the fruit of a long and complex history of social, scientific and philosophical development. We tend to take surveys for granted, but viewed historically they are an achievement. Survey research today is underpinned by discoveries in sampling theory, multivariate analysis and scaling methods. Readily obtainable computer packages make sophisticated analytical tools widely available. Fundamental ideas such as the concept of the respondent – a person who is both the object of enquiry and an informant – were very slow to develop (Marsh 1982: 19). These advances took place in a range of disciplines – sociology, psychology, demography, geography, marketing, organization research, statistics – and this contributed to their success, since no one discipline had a monopoly on the survey.

In First World countries, surveys are found everywhere, and are conducted by all manner of organizations, both large and small, from government agencies through large business corporations to small voluntary organizations. If surveys were as hopeless as some of their more extreme critics suggest, it is hard to explain why they are so widespread and so enduring. Box 1.4 gives an example of a survey whose impact has been incalculable.

**Box 1.4 Smoking and lung cancer**

In the first half of the twentieth century, lung cancer death rates increased sharply in several countries. By the 1950s, there was evidence from both laboratory work and studies of hospital patient records that appeared to implicate smoking as a factor. However, the tobacco companies and some doctors remained unconvinced, arguing that atmospheric pollution and improved diagnosis were plausible alternatives and that the causal processes underlying respiratory cancers had not been identified.

In 1951, Richard Doll and A. Bradford Hill (with the later collaboration of Richard Peto) embarked on a major epidemiological study of smoking and cancer. They arranged for the British Medical Association (BMA) to send questionnaires about smoking behaviour to every doctor on the Medical Register in Britain at four points over the next 21 years (eliciting responses from over 34,000 individuals). They also traced and analysed the death certificates of 10,072 doctors who died over the period.
Among the most potentially important but also problematic surveys are those which involve international comparisons. One example is discussed in Box 1.5.

The results (see, for example, Doll and Hill 1952 and Doll and Peto 1976) showed that the lung cancer death rate of those doctors under 70 years who smoked was twice that of lifelong non-smokers of comparable age, with increased death rates for other respiratory tract conditions and degenerative heart disease.

Although the research did not attempt to explain what it was about smoking that caused lung cancer and the other associated conditions, it did provide large-scale evidence of a link between smoking and ill health. This evidence was hard to refute and impossible to ignore. The report’s publication marked a significant turning point in official and public awareness of the dangers of tobacco smoking. Some other noteworthy features of the study are listed below.

- Doctors were selected not because of any especially high or low levels of smoking or any suspected special susceptibility to cancer, but mainly because they were a population likely to be interested in the research, motivated to cooperate and capable of reporting their smoking accurately and honestly.

- Another reason for choosing doctors was the existence of an accurate and ready-made sampling frame, the Medical Register, which meant there would be less difficulty in tracing doctors than a sample from the general population.

- The study was able to show that the risks of death increased steadily with the number of cigarettes smoked.

- It also revealed significant reductions in the death rate of the group of doctors who gave up smoking compared to those who continued to smoke. The overall death rate from lung cancer declined over the course of the study as many doctors gave up smoking, while other non-respiratory cancer rates remained stable.

- The consistency of the lung cancer death rate among doctors across different areas cast doubt on both atmospheric pollution and diagnostic improvement as major contributory factors. If these two had been operating, a differential between rural and urban rates would have been detected.

- The study put the onus on those sceptical of the smoking–cancer link to find a factor that varied simultaneously with the incidence of smoking (the independent variable) and disease rates (the dependent variables).
Box 1.5 An international survey of adult literacy

Comparative survey research may seek the collection of data from respondents who belong to different ethnic groups, cultures or nation states. The design of such studies requires both methodological and administrative problems to be addressed. Without sacrificing a standardized approach, the data collection instruments may need to be translated into different languages and to use quite different forms of expression to reflect divergent cultural perspectives. Practical considerations can rule out the use of self-completion questionnaires (rural postal services may be inadequate). The idea that certain low status social categories (children, unmarried women) will give their opinions freely to strangers in private interviews may be locally unfamiliar or unacceptable.

The International Adult Literacy Survey, conducted on behalf of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1994, was an attempt to establish the comparative levels of adult literacy and numeracy in eight developed societies (Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States and Eire) using a suite of common tests and schedules (OECD 1995). A research team from each nation conducted a probability sample that was designed to be representative of its non-institutionalized population aged 16–65. In total, well over 20,000 individuals were involved. In Canada, respondents were given a choice of English or French test materials; in Switzerland, the sample was restricted to French-speaking and German-speaking cantons with respondents required to use the corresponding language. Respondents completed a test booklet and their demographic and employment details were gathered in an interview lasting, on average, one hour, conducted in their homes. People with very low levels of literacy were screened out of the samples by initial test questions.

Among the general findings were marked national differences: for example Sweden had large proportions at the top levels of the numeracy and literacy scales with small proportions at the lowest level, while the position in Poland was the reverse. There were also strong links in all countries between being currently unemployed and low levels of literacy. However, the significance and implications of the findings of such complex surveys is open to challenge. The measurement procedures used rest on assumptions that can be contested while the nature of the causal links lying behind the observed differences, in this case links between individual skills, employment and economic development, may be contentious. For a critique of the IALS, see Levine (1999).
Critiques of surveys

Over the years there have been numerous criticisms of social surveys as a research strategy. We can classify them into two broad, diametrically opposed types: scientific critiques and humanistic critiques.

Scientific critiques of surveys

Critiques of this kind are often mounted by people for whom the experimental method is the only valid means of arriving at scientific findings. According to them, surveys may display some of the trappings of science – reliance on statistical analysis, use of jargon, the appearance of objectivity – but all this is superficial. The charge is that surveys cannot be scientific because the variables are not properly controlled. In experiments, the researcher makes strenuous efforts to control for the possible effects of extraneous independent variables. In a randomized clinical test, for example, everything is geared to measuring the effects of the drug. That and that alone is what interests us. Experiments are designed to isolate a very small number of key variables so as to measure the causal relations between them.

Surveys, in contrast, are sprawling constructions, typically involving a large number of variables covering a respondent’s attributes, behaviour and opinions. No valid causal inferences can be drawn from survey research, it is said. If we find a correlation between, say, respondents’ religious affiliation and their level of educational attainment, we have no way of knowing what the causal mechanisms are or even, in many cases, in which direction the causality runs. The most that can be hoped for from a survey is some descriptive material that may suggest hypotheses which can be scientifically tested through an experimental design.

Humanistic critiques of surveys

In this perspective, the problem with surveys is not that they fail to be scientific, but that the aim to be scientific is misconceived. This critique has a number of dimensions.

One major objection is that surveys are atomistic: they treat society and culture as no more than the sum of the individuals within it. The sociology of religion provides an example. Can we really measure the religiosity of a society by asking a sample of the population about their own religious beliefs and behaviour? Arguably, we should assess the social and cultural importance of religion by examining the influence of religion on the education system, on the law, on the political process, and on the commercial decisions of business corporations (Aldridge 2000). If our investigation shows that religion has little influence, then society has been secularized -
religion has lost social significance – even if our surveys show that the majority of people say they believe in God.

Paradoxically, although surveys are atomistic they are not really concerned with individuals at all. The thrust is to produce aggregate data: 80 per cent are this, 55 per cent think that, 2 per cent do the other. The language of survey research betrays its lack of concern with the individual: respondents, samples, cases. And what are statistics, if not a means of analysing aggregate data? Focus on the individual human being, and the statistician is silent.

One strand in the humanistic critique of survey research has been trenchantly expressed by Blumer (1956) in his attack on the limitations of ‘variable analysis’ – by which he means the reduction of social processes to the correlation between variables. These variables, he argues, are not generic: they do not stand for abstract categories, and so cannot be generalized beyond the specific context of the survey. They are locked into what Blumer calls the ‘here and now’, which, we may note, soon becomes the ‘there and then’. The depressing conclusion is that variable analysis results in knowledge which is neither generalizable nor cumulative. Nor does it offer any insight into the interpretive processes through which social reality is constructed.

According to the humanistic critique, surveys are only marginally less artificial than experiments. Surveys cannot overcome the problem of the reactivity of research instruments, because they are by their very nature a crashing intrusion into the normal flow of social life. Respondents are self-consciously behaving as respondents. One obvious and ineradicable expression of this is the problem of social desirability. Respondents’ answers are influenced by their desire to be helpful and to live up to their own self-image or to an ideal which they think will look good to the researcher. Respondents will therefore over-report their virtuous acts and play down or ignore their failings and foibles. They will also try to appear consistent, with the result that their opinions and beliefs will seem more coherent than they really are.

Part of the artificiality of surveys, according to critics, is that they are driven by the concerns of the researcher rather than the respondent. The essence of a social survey is to put questions to respondents. Whatever efforts we make to allow respondents to express themselves in their own words, we cannot go very far. It is simply not possible in a survey design to have a large number of open-ended questions, where respondents are free to answer in whatever words they choose. Most of our questionnaire or interview will inevitably consist of closed questions, where we present a series of choices from which respondents are asked to choose.

It follows from this, say the critics, that we shall find it almost impossible to gauge the salience of issues to our respondents. It is we, after all, who are raising the issues in the first place. We can of course ask respondents how important given issues are for them. Even so, this is hardly a solution to the
social desirability problem. Admitting to a researcher that you have no inter-
est in issues apparently deemed to be important is a difficult thing to do.

Some critics conclude from all this that the only valid use of surveys is to
gather basic factual information, as in national censuses. Market researchers
can use surveys to find out what products we buy and what possessions we
own. This, however, is hardly the stuff of a vibrant social science. It is
mundane, untheorised fact-grubbing – what C. Wright Mills (1970) called
abstracted empiricism. It shows, what is more, that the basic function of
social surveys is to provide useful information to people who have power
over us. Some draw the devastating conclusion that surveys are an instru-
ment used by Orwellian Big Brothers to keep tabs on the proles.

Response to the critiques of surveys

Few sociologists nowadays see sociology as a hard science on a par with
nuclear physics or microbiology. Most people agree. For that reason, the
scientific critique of surveys is less pressing than the humanistic critique.
Despite the scientific critique, we believe that surveys have a part to play in
establishing causal relations, as we shall explain. But causality is always
complex because society is complex. Decades of research into the effects of
the mass media, including a host of true experiments, have produced very
little hard evidence. The truth is – though pressure groups find it impossible
to accept – we simply do not know much about the effects of the mass
media, and perhaps we never will.

For us, for our students, and we suspect for most of our readers, it is the
humanistic critique that is potentially the more damaging. Our response to
it, developed throughout the book, is in essence, this.

Poor surveys

It is sadly true that too many surveys are poorly designed, badly executed
and incorrectly analysed. They yield nothing of value. Clearly, though,

exactly the same is true of ill-conceived experiments and botched field work.
‘Rubbish in, rubbish out’ applies to all research strategies. Our aim is to pro-
mote the cause of good surveys.

A multi-method approach

Surveys can be fruitfully combined, in all sorts of imaginative ways, with
unstructured interviews, observational fieldwork, documentary analysis,
focus groups and so on. Using more than one research strategy enables us to

triangulate data, that is, to use a variety of methods to test the validity and
reliability of our findings. We give examples in Chapter 3. We do not accept
that surveys cannot address sensitive and subtle issues. In our view, it is disastrous to erect a sectarian barrier between surveys and fieldwork, quantitative and qualitative methods. As Oakley has argued (1998), one danger is the creation of a gendered hierarchy of knowledge in which quantitative research is represented as objective, hard-edged and masculine, while qualitative research is subjective, sensitive and feminine. The apparently sharp opposition between quantitative and qualitative research is a social construct that perpetuates patriarchy; upon serious examination, all social research turns out to have quantitative and qualitative elements.

The role of social theory

Social surveys can play a significant part in the development and testing of sociological theory. Surveys do not have to be fact-grubbing. It is worth adding that in many cases so little is known about a topic that a few facts would not go amiss.

Servants of power

It is true that survey research is useful to commercial organizations and to the state. On the other hand, survey research can give a voice to the general public, to consumers, and to disadvantaged and disprivileged groups. This brings us to the social context of surveys.

The social context of surveys

Social surveys as we understand them are a modern phenomenon. They developed during the period of industrialization, and came to full fruition in the twentieth century. The British Census began in 1801, and has been carried out every ten years since that date with the exception of 1941, at the height of the Second World War. Similarly, the decennial (ten yearly) Census of Population in the United States began in 1790. Two of the most important surveys ever carried out in the UK were Charles Booth's Life and Labour of the People in London (published 1889–1902 in seventeen volumes) and Seebohm Rowntree's study of York, Poverty: A Study of Town Life (1902). A number of influential surveys were carried out by Mass Observation, which was founded in 1936 and which had a keen sense of a mission to inform the general public about the state of the nation. In our own times, major national surveys include the General Household Survey and the Labour Force Survey. In addition to these large-scale affairs, there are countless small surveys taking place every week of the year (though they slacken off during major holidays). There is every sign that surveys will continue to flourish in the twenty-first century and beyond.
Social surveys are also a feature of First World societies. They depend upon strong central institutions and advanced communications infrastructures. The Third World cannot always afford them, and the command economies of the communist societies had less need of them. At the time of writing, the former communist countries are experiencing profound conflicts in their transition to a market economy, a liberal-democratic polity and a consumer society. Their problems are not just economic but social and cultural. The neglect of serious survey work was characteristic of their lack of responsiveness to consumer interests.

Reading texts on social survey design and analysis written in the 1960s and 1970s can be revealing. At times it seems almost another world. The social scientist typically comes across as an authority demanding cooperation from respondents. A cultural gulf lies between us and them. These respondents are incompetent. They will misunderstand our interview questions and mess up our questionnaires unless we give precise instructions and spell everything out in minute detail. Similarly, the survey director, a man, will have to give lengthy training and detailed instructions to his hired-hand interviewers, who are women. These women, like the respondents, tend to get things wrong unless their work is closely monitored. The alienated labour of the mass production assembly-line is thus reflected in the closely controlled routines of the hired-hand researcher. The advice given in these texts is not so much poor as out of date.

The language of this era carries over into contemporary research, and much of it can feel uncomfortable. The people who take part in our research are conventionally called ‘respondents’, which may suggest a stimulus–response model of our relationship with them. Some researchers think it would be better to speak of ‘informants’, as the social anthropologists do, to acknowledge the point that people are supplying us with information which they have and we want. At least, unlike many psychologists and medical researchers, we do not refer to people as ‘subjects’.

Another unfortunate word is ‘instructions’. When we ask people to fill out questionnaires, we need to give them guidance on what we are looking for, as well as some explanation of the rationale underlying our questions. This guidance is conventionally termed ‘instructions’, even though we do not have the power of command that the term appears to imply. People can refuse to be interviewed, or put the phone down on us, or throw our questionnaire into the waste paper basket. They can also complain to us, our sponsors or our employers, as we have both discovered.

In some ways, this language of ‘respondents’ and ‘instructions’ does not matter. After all, we do not use it in talking to the people we are surveying; it is an occupational discourse we employ among ourselves to talk about them. The point is, we need constantly to remind ourselves about our relationship with our respondents. Just as a commercial firm which treats its
customers as ‘punters’ is likely to lose business, so a survey which sees respondents as ignorant dimwits is a survey scarcely worth doing.

Today, more than ever before, people are uneasy about the way in which social surveys use aggregate data. In surveys we are typically comparing men with women, smokers with non-smokers, and car drivers with cyclists and pedestrians. Individuals are submerged into a category – which we may find objectionable. People have complained for years about sociologists’ alleged obsession with social class. In the words of Number 6, the lead character in the 1960s cult TV series The Prisoner: ‘I am not a number, I am a human being!’ The more we can persuade our respondents that their own individual experience and opinions count for something, the better.

Reflecting on the socio-cultural context of surveys can help us to identify the reasons why people are willing to take part in them and the main sticking-points. From these reflections, we can draw some broad conclusions about basic principles which can guide us in designing our research.

**Why are people willing to take part in surveys?**

**Helping the researcher**

This has always been one of the most powerful motives for filling out questionnaires and agreeing to be interviewed. People want to be helpful. Unfortunately, their help may take the form of telling us what they think we want to hear. This is another example of the social desirability problem, one of the main challenges that confront the social researcher.

**Altruism**

As well as helping the researcher, respondents are often motivated by the hope that the research will promote social progress. People volunteer for all sorts of social activities in order to make the world a better place. Richard Titmuss’s classic work (1970), The Gift Relationship, uses the UK’s voluntary blood donor system as a case study of the power of altruism.

**Citizenship**

Responding to surveys can be a way of expressing one’s democratic right as a citizen to have a voice in public affairs. This is probably the main reason why people turn out to vote in elections. Even if our vote is unlikely to make any difference to the outcome, we may still hold it important to have our say in the democratic process. So it is with surveys. This implies that people’s motivation to take part in a survey will be strengthened if they believe that their expressions of opinion will count for something.
Let’s talk about us

Often, we survey not the general public but a particular group within it: students, clergy, people with literacy problems, members of an ethnic minority and so on. In such surveys it is normally clear to respondents that the reason they have been selected is that they are members of a particular group or stratum in society. Our survey gives them the chance to be representatives of their group. Taking part in survey research is one way a group of people can gain a hearing for their opinions, experiences and ideas. This motive can be very powerful when a group feels a sense of grievance that its point of view has been misunderstood and its problems ignored. Luckily for us, most groups feel that way.

Let’s talk about me

Given appropriate safeguards, people like talking about themselves. It may not always be the noblest motive, but if we expect our respondents to be saints we should consider an alternative career to survey research.

In the next section, we discuss some of the reasons why people may be reluctant or unwilling to take part in surveys. Very often, motives are mixed. People may have strong reasons both to participate and not to do so. Box 1.6 gives one instance of this ambivalence.

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Box 1.6 Establishing the ‘dark figure’ of unrecorded crimes

In the late 1960s, the US government sought to expand its intelligence about crime and criminals beyond the information available in the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), the standard format in which official police and court statistics are presented in the USA (of similar status to the Home Office’s Criminal Statistics in the UK). One objective was to estimate the size of the dark figure, the volume of crimes that had actually been committed but which, for various reasons, went unrecorded in the UCR. Researchers adopted an ambitious design which included surveys of selected US cities and of businesses in order to gather information on levels of white collar crimes like fraud. However, the most influential strand was a survey of the general public, based on eliciting details from a representative sample of US households about the occasions on which household members had been the victims of eight major types of crime, defined in the same way as they were in the UCR (Coleman and Moynihan 1996: 71–2).

The first US nationwide victimization survey in 1972 suggested crime rates three to five times those of the UCR. Despite a variety of methodological problems, including doubts about the accuracy of respondent recall.
Why are people reluctant to take part in surveys?

Decline of deference

It used to be said popularly that Britain was a class-conscious society, riven by class distinction and snobbery. In sociological terms, what was being referred to was not class but status: looking up to or down on people depending on their social background, occupation, education and style of life compared to your own. Profound social and cultural changes are eroding these status-conscious patterns of thought and behaviour, as demonstrated by the Affluent Worker studies of the 1960s (Goldthorpe et al.). One consequence is that social researchers can no longer expect deferential cooperation from ‘ordinary’ people. What is true of Britain is true elsewhere.

Scepticism about experts

Linked to the decline of deference is a growing scepticism about the expertise of scientists and professionals. Highly publicized scandals have reduced public confidence in the pronouncements of experts. The BSE crisis in the UK is one dramatic example. One practical consequence is that simply...
mentioning a university or scientific affiliation in a covering letter is no longer accepted as a guarantee of honourable intentions in the way it once was.

**Consumerism**

The rise of consumer society is one of the key issues in contemporary sociology. Consumerism implies choice, including the choice of exit – in this case, refusal to take part. It may also imply an orientation towards cost–benefit analysis: why should I take part? What will I gain, and what will it cost me in time, effort, or frustration?

**Competition from market research and salespeople**

Social scientists are not the only people conducting surveys. The fact that commercial market research relies on surveys as a principal source of information is a sign of the power of the survey method. Salespeople sometimes pretend that they are conducting a survey when they are really trying to sell us something (a tribute vice pays to virtue). Telephone sales pitches routinely begin with the false assurance, ‘Don’t worry, Mr Aldridge, I’m not trying to sell you anything’. We need to distinguish our own research from these other activities.

**Survey fatigue**

Arguably, there are just too many surveys going on. People get fed up (technically, survey fatigue), and are not willing to take part in yet another survey unless it is well designed and seems especially worthwhile.

**Intensification of social life**

The society of leisure, once predicted in the 1960s, has not yet arrived. Many people feel under increasing pressure at work. All sorts of therapies are available to help people cope with the stress of modern living. Our telephone call, our ring on the doorbell, our questionnaire on the doormat, may seem like yet another intrusion into people’s precious free time. Our surveys need to come across as part of the solution, not part of the problem.

**Dislike of form-filling**

One source of stress is filling out official forms. We have yet to meet anyone who enjoys doing their tax return. A questionnaire which feels like an official form is probably not one that will achieve a high response rate. So, too, an interview that is experienced as an interrogation is unlikely to yield rich information or deep insights.
Privacy

The concept of ‘the information society’ has received a lot of attention from sociologists (Webster 1995). People are concerned about the data that commercial and public agencies hold on them; hence many societies have passed laws on data protection and freedom of information. In general, people are nowadays far more suspicious about the uses to which data are put than they were in the past. This means that any guarantee of confidentiality has to be seen to be watertight. If the researcher can guarantee anonymity, so much the better, even though it can raise problems for the researcher. The nature of the guarantee of confidentiality or anonymity should be realistic and crystal clear.

Box 1.7 Encouraging people to take part in surveys: general lessons

• Value of the research
  We presumably think that our work will be valuable. The more we can convince respondents that this is true, the better. Wherever possible, we should find ways of feeding the main findings back to our respondents and to people like them.

• Value of respondent’s contribution
  Why should a respondent bother to answer our questions, when they have plenty of other things to do? What difference will their participation make to the value of our research? Some respondents are worried that they have nothing original and interesting to say, or that they don’t know much about the topic. We need to convince people that their own individual response is important.

• Being explicit
  In modern societies, respondents are increasingly sophisticated and critical. They are familiar with surveys, and alert to deceptive techniques of persuasion. Many people are concerned about the researchers’ hidden agenda, their sources of funding, and the uses to which the findings will be put. We need to make the rationale of our research as explicit as possible.

• A humanistic approach
  Many respondents, and most sociologists, do not believe that sociology is a hard science like nuclear physics or inorganic chemistry. If our style of research – for example, rigidly structured questionnaires and interviews, with little opportunity for respondents to express their own views in their own words – suggests that we are treating people as the objects of scientific research, we are likely to encounter resistance. People should have the opportunity to express their views in their own words.
Research ethics

Professional research ethics can be seen in the context of the wider cultural factors we have just been reviewing. The fundamental principles of research ethics flow from the nature of the social relationship between researcher and respondent, a relationship which is necessarily embedded in a set of cultural values, norms and codes of conduct.

All of the major professional bodies such as the British Sociological Association (BSA), the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the American Sociological Association publish guidelines on research ethics to which their members are expected to adhere. Appendix 2 suggests a few web addresses where these may be viewed.

The general principles of research ethics impact somewhat differently, depending on the research strategy chosen. Despite its different applications, the core of research ethics is due respect for the integrity of people participating in our research.

Respect for our respondents can be broken down into three key components: informed consent, confidentiality and sensitivity.

Informed consent

Compared to fieldwork observations, one potential virtue of surveys is that they are relatively overt. The problems of covert research are far less pressing for the survey researcher than they may be for the ethnographer working in the field. Even so, as survey researchers we need to be as open as we reasonably can be about the purposes of our research, the sources of funding, and the potential audiences for and uses of our findings. We should make it easy for respondents to raise any queries they may have. In some cases it may be desirable to give the name of a responsible person whom they can contact if they want to verify who we are and the nature of our research. In interviews, we should have proof of our identity readily available. It may also be desirable to indicate that our research has the approval or support of a relevant person or body – a trade union, say, or a charity. We also need to consider ways in which we can make a summary of our findings available to our respondents, so that informed consent comes to fruition in an informed outcome.

Confidentiality

Respondents are usually offered an assurance of confidentiality. In some cases this extends further to anonymity, which is the stronger guarantee that not even the researchers will be able to identify who the respondent is -
something which is only easily achieved in the case of self-completion questionnaires. Our assurances need to be as clear as possible, so that people are not misled. We also need to be aware that, in some cases, it is all too possible for a knowledgeable reader to identify a respondent even if we have given them a pseudonym and apparently concealed their identity. This is a particular problem when the researcher is surveying the members of an organization: there may be very few women or members of ethnic minorities, particularly in senior positions. How are we going to represent their responses while concealing their identity from their fellow workers and their bosses?

**Sensitivity**

One important area in which sensitivity needs to be exercised is in the use of language, particularly as regards ‘race’ and ethnicity, sex and gender, age, and disability. Examples of good practice can be found in other people’s published work. A particularly useful source is The Question Bank, a resource centre funded by the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) and run by the National Centre for Social Research, and the Universities of Southampton and Surrey in the UK. Its internet address is: [http://www.natcen.ac.uk/cass/](http://www.natcen.ac.uk/cass/). Language evolves, and varies cross-culturally in the English-speaking world, so it is important to keep up to date on acceptable usage in the culture in question.

While encouraging respondents to take part in a survey is entirely appropriate, attempting to put pressure on them is not. As citizens they have the right to refuse (except when there is a legal requirement to respond, as in the decennial Census). The potential for undue pressure is greatest in an organizational context, where people may feel that they will be judged ‘uncooperative’ if they decline to participate.

**An invitation to survey research**

Our book is an invitation to survey research. The word invitation implies joining in something worthwhile and enjoyable. Surveys can be both, we believe. There are, of course, problems and frustrations, and we have tried to be open about them. At the same time, we are positive. The problems are there to be overcome, and a successful survey can contribute to understanding social life in the hope of making things better.
Surveying the social world

Key summary points

- Surveys are a form of research strategy.
- They involve the sociological imagination.
- They have to capture the imagination of the respondents.
- They can be combined with other research strategies.

Points for reflection

- Does the word ‘survey’ make your heart sink? If so, why?
- If you had unlimited resources and a year to do it, would it be worthwhile to do a survey on behalf of your favourite charity, or would it be a waste of time?
- If you did that survey, how would you encourage people to take part?

Further reading

Marsh (1982) The Survey Method: The Contribution of Surveys to Sociological Explanation is an excellent account of the survey as a research strategy. It examines the major critiques and vigorously defends surveys against them. For a comprehensive account of the survey method see Babbie (2001) The Practice of Social Research.