

Unit 20

Survey Method

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Learning Objectives



It is expected that after reading unit 20 you will be able to Proceed with organising a mini research project in terms of preparing for data collection

- ❖ Work out the relevance of survey method of data collection for your research
- ❖ Spell out the techniques of carrying out a survey in your own research
- ❖ Gain confidence in pointing out benefits and weaknesses of the survey method to be used by you in your research.

20.1 Introduction

In Block 5 you acquired, whenever required, the skills of carrying out statistical calculations for arriving at significant results from the data collected during research. The question arises as to how do you collect data? What are the different ways of gathering relevant facts regarding the subject of your research? Unit 20 is about one of the ways of collecting facts and figures pertinent to your research. The unit begins with the question of why should one use the survey method of data collection? Next, it goes into the historical background of survey research and explains what is survey research. It mentions the practice of sampling in data collection but does not go into its details because Unit 15 in Block 5 and Unit 21 in Block 6 deal with the subject of sampling in ample detail. The unit discusses how to actually carry out a survey and outlines the advantages and weaknesses of survey research.

Unit 20 is only an introductory note on the important subject of survey method. Units 21,22 and 23 provide you with full details of survey research so that you may actually carry out a survey as part of your mini research project, a requirement for completing MSO 002. I hope that you have selected a topic for your research project and identified its methodology.

20.2 Rationale of Survey Research Method

Social science research techniques are often classified into two categories, namely, qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative research enables us to understand the subtle aspects of social relations. They are particularly useful when one is interested in probing a specific question in depth, its meanings and their different interpretations. However, qualitative methods also have their limitations. They are, for example, more suitable when research is being carried out in a small setting or is focused on a specific group or community. Qualitative research methods are not very useful when we need to know about macro phenomena, such as the demographic structure of a population or the extent and nature of poverty or disease.

Quantitative methods or survey research enables us to study these questions in a more comprehensive manner. Depending upon the requirement, survey research can be extended to as large an area/population as a whole nation or even the entire world. Thus when the universe of study is large and the researchers are looking for broad trends or patterns in a given population they often resort to survey methods. In other words, qualitative and quantitative research methods are not opposed to each other rather they are complementary. The two can be combined, one enriching the other.

An important feature of survey research is that unlike qualitative methods, which are generally used by specialist researchers, survey research does not have the monopoly of sociologists or economists. Surveys have become part and parcel of modern life, constituting almost an industry

The contemporary world is often described as the "information society[®]". This implies that the flow of information has become its most crucial and central aspect. Recent advances in telecommunication technologies have made this flow of information easier as well as critical for the working of present day society, its politics and its economics.

As is the case with information society, "agrarian" and "industrial" societies too were products of major breakthroughs in technology. Some sociologists think that there have been primarily three revolutions in human history, namely, agricultural revolution, urban revolution and industrial revolution. However, the agricultural and industrial societies are defined primarily in terms of their major economic activity, that is, the nature and means of production. By comparison, the term "information society" has a different connotation. While production (whether agricultural or industrial) continues to be central, it is carried out in a regime of information. In decision-making processes, farmers and factory owners work on the basis of the available information. In some cases the producers themselves generate such information before they plan production of certain commodities.

Similarly, consumers decide about consumption according to the

information that mass media make available to them. Markets depend a great deal on the flow of information. Each time a company decides to launch a new product, it undertakes extensive marketing surveys about the tastes and purchasing powers of potential buyers. Producers are expected to provide information about their products to potential buyers through advertisements, particularly in those media which have a larger impact on the people.

Information, its production and distribution has also become an important sector of the economic system. It provides employment to a large number of people and generates a huge amount of wealth. There are a number of professional organisations and companies in almost every country that carry out surveys for all kinds of clients, from business houses to political parties. This is what we meant when we said earlier that survey is an industry in the contemporary world.

Information has also become crucial for the modern state and the functioning of the democratic systems. Almost the entire policy making process of the modern welfare state is based on information (see Box 20.1).

Box 20.1 Information Gathering by the State

Various organs of the state collect all possible information about its population through periodic censuses and surveys. The Government of India, for example, has a specialist body called National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), which periodically undertakes sample surveys of the Indian population on various social and economic parameters. The data that it generates is used by various government agencies for formulating policies and programmes. Similarly, the Indian Planning Commission also has a 'programme evaluation wing', which undertakes surveys in order to evaluate the working of various developmental programmes. Other departments of the government also sponsor surveys focused on the issues of their concern. Similar institutions are found in other parts of the world. The point is that the information about populace is essential not only for governance but also for formulating and executing the programmes of development, and as such information is generated through periodically carried out surveys.

Global agencies involved with developmental activities either generate their own information about the economic well being of populations in different parts of the world or depend upon the available data on various subjects (such as poverty, unemployment, health). The World Bank and the different agencies of the United Nations periodically publish reports on different aspects of the existing state of affairs in a given country.

The political process too has become information oriented. Political parties in modern democracy closely monitor "public opinion" and articulate their priorities accordingly. Similarly, citizens in modern democracies also form their opinions about various political parties on the basis of information they get from several sources. Psephologists[®], who carry out surveys on 'public opinion' before elections and make predictions (or projections)

about the possible outcome of elections, have come to acquire a respectable place in politics and media. Television channels and newspapers undertake elaborate surveys during election times on the prospects of various political parties and the voting behaviour of people. Similarly, in countries like the United States of America and other Western democracies, the media and the corporations constantly monitor the popularity ratings of their leaders and political parties, both in power and outside.

Besides the fact that surveys have gained in importance in the modern world, they have always been an important research method. They have been used for understanding the emerging trends or patterns in a given population or for testing hypotheses. Some of them may have policy implications, while some may be purely for academic interest. For example, sociologists interested in understanding the process of secularisation may undertake surveys on how often people perform religious rituals in their everyday social, economic and political life.

20.3 History of Survey Research

Though systematically carried out surveys have a short history, rulers in the past have always been interested in finding out what was going on in their states and the condition of their subjects. There are umpteen stories of rulers (or their representatives) going to meet the public, sometimes incognito, with the explicit intent of enquiring about their welfare and any seeds of discontent. This was considered extremely important for proper rule. In ancient times roman emperors polled surveys of their citizens. The Victorians social reformists undertook surveys and interviewed ten to twenty thousand persons for seeking an adequate representation of opinions.

However, survey research in its systematic form began after the Industrial Revolution and urbanisation of Europe. Karl Marx was perhaps the first social scientist to collect information from some key informants about the condition of industrial workers and tried to relate it to his theory of class society and class struggle. On the basis of such data he also tried to quantify workers' exploitation in terms of working hours and wages rates (see Box 20.2 on early surveys).

Box 20.2 Some Early Surveys.

The first systematic survey was supposedly carried out by Henry Mayhew, a Scottish philosopher and social reformer, who wanted to find out about the living conditions in Edinburgh in the early 19th century and asked ordinary people to report on their situation. With reformist zeal, Charles Booth initiated a survey on *Labour and Life of the People of London* in 1886. The findings of his survey were published in seventeen volumes between 1889 and 1902. Around the same time several other surveys were carried out, mostly in Great Britain and elsewhere in the Western world, focusing primarily on the measurement of poverty.

20.4 Defining Survey Research

Survey research is basically a method of gathering information from a population on a given subject. Unlike qualitative research, survey research invariably covers a large population; but it does not imply that it collects information from each and every individual. Statisticians have designed various methods of drawing a representative sample from a given population, which can reveal trends for the entire population.

Quantitative research methods are often classified into two types, namely, census and sample based survey research. When information is gathered from each and every member of the population, or in other words, when all units of the population are covered for information, it is called census. But it is an expensive, lengthy and time-consuming process. Therefore, we focus on a portion (or unit) of the population; it is from the study of a part that we arrive at an understanding of the whole. When a part (or section, or unit) of a population is studied, it is called 'sample survey research'. The term 'sample' is used for the part of a population that is subjected to study. Identifying such a portion or sample population is not easy. In order to make a survey scientific and representative, one must follow a scientific procedure.

20.5 Sampling and Survey Techniques

Sampling is a method that identifies a representative number from a given universe of population. There are two basic properties of a sample.

- i) It should be adequate.
- ii) It should be representative of the universe (the 'entire population').

The most crucial point in sampling is to make sure that one's personal values do not influence the selection process. In order to keep out the researcher's bias, various techniques or procedures of selecting a sample have been suggested. For detailed information on sampling see Unit 15 of Block 5 and Unit 21 of Block 6.

Let us at this stage complete Reflection and Action 20.1 exercise.

Reflection and Action 20.1

You can assess the usefulness of a survey in terms of its purpose and therefore it is necessary that you do not confuse the kinds of material you are going to collect. In order to gain more clarity on this point, answer the following questions on a sheet of paper.

Is the survey of "facts" that you count yourself the same as a survey of facts which are reported by respondents and only tallied by the researcher?

Are the respondents' opinions or statements about items not social facts and as such worth researching about?

Is it not necessary to consider whether and how you would locate them in the social context and use to fill out your understanding of the "facts" that you counted yourself?

20.6 Operationlising Survey Research Tools

An important step in any kind of research is the preparation of research tools. Survey research is typically carried out with the help of a questionnaire or interview-schedule. Preparing a questionnaire and interview schedule is the most important step in survey research (see Box 20.3 on the difference between a questionnaire and an interview).

Box 20.3 The Difference between a Questionnaire and an Interview

When the respondents themselves fill in the answers (or responses) to the questions asked, it is called questionnaire. In a schedule, the investigators read out the questions to the respondents and fill in the responses.

There are different ways of approaching a respondent. The simplest way is to approach the potential respondent directly. That is how most surveys are conducted. A research team would invariably go to a village or a locality and try talking to the head of the household (HOH). Questionnaires are also sent by mail; such questionnaires are called 'mailed questionnaires'.

Another method of approaching the respondent is the household drop-off survey. In this the researchers go to the respondents' homes (or businesses) and hand over the questionnaires to the respondents. The respondents can be either requested to mail them back to the researchers or the researchers may personally go to collect them at a later date.

Some researchers have also started using telephones for approaching respondents and filling the interview schedule through conversation on phone. Telephone interviews have become a popular mode of carrying out surveys in countries like the United States of America. There are obvious advantages of such an approach. Telephone interviews can save a lot of time. One can also cover a large area or population through telephone surveys without having to travel. The researchers can also approach the respondents at a later date and ask follow-up questions. Today, e-mail is also being used for mailing questionnaires.

However, in a country like India telephones (or e-mail) are still a privilege of the few. Though some rural areas are now connected by telephone, not every household has a telephone connection. In fact, only a small proportion of the entire population in cities has telephone connections. Thus, only in certain kinds of research where the respondents are largely from middle class backgrounds that one can use the method of telephonic interviews. In such settings not everyone will be willing to respond positively to a request for an interview on telephone. Even when they agree, the interviews generally will have to be short and precise.

Perhaps the best way of carrying out a survey is through personal interviews. Unlike the mail survey or telephone (or e-mail) interviews, in personal interviews, the researchers have opportunities of not only getting

responses from the respondents directly but also get the opportunities of probing some questions which may be beyond the scope of the survey but may help in enriching the data, finding answers to certain critical questions, and sometimes even in identifying further questions.

Once the data have been collected, the researchers have to codify and process the data in a manner that it becomes presentable in tabular form and charts. It should also become accessible for use for statistical treatment that would tell us about the different qualities of the data. Issues relating to processing of data and its presentation in the report will be discussed in detail in the units of Block 8.

20.7 Advantages and Weaknesses of Survey Research

Survey research has the following advantages:

- i) Survey research is relatively inexpensive (especially self-administered surveys).
- ii) Survey research is useful in describing the characteristics of a large population, demographic structure of a population, and its emerging trends and patterns.
- iii) Survey research can be administered from remote locations using mail, e-mail or telephone. Consequently, very large samples are feasible, making the results statistically significant even when analysing multiple variables.
- iv) In survey research one can ask many questions about a given topic, which gives considerable flexibility to the analysis.
- v) We can choose different ways of administering a survey. From face-to-face interviews to telephones and e-mails one can use any mode of collecting data depending on one's requirements and limitations.
- vi) Unlike the qualitative methods, survey research is carried out through standardized questions, which makes measurement more precise by enforcing uniform definitions upon the participants. Standardisation ensures that similar kinds of data are collected from groups and then interpreted comparatively (between-group study), implying more objectivity and higher reliability.

Following are some of the common problems with survey research:

- i) A preoccupation with standardisation results in designing questions in very general terms to make them minimally appropriate for all respondents. This could lead to simplification and one may end up missing what may be most appropriate to many respondents.
- ii) Survey research is inflexible in the sense that it requires a precise study design. Everything must be worked out in advance, the

tools to be used and the method of administering the tools. In order to make a survey methodologically sound, it should remain unchanged throughout the period of data collection.

- iii) In order to make a survey viable and meaningful the researcher has to make sure that a large proportion of selected respondents agree to respond. This, however, may not always be an easy task to achieve. In such situations carrying out a survey becomes difficult.
- iv) Surveys also demand a great deal of attention and honesty on the part of respondents, particularly when a questionnaire is being used and the survey is self-administered. Respondents may not always be willing to give such attention to filling the questionnaire. Sometimes, it may be hard for participants to recall certain information or to take a clear position on controversial issues.
- v) Another problem with survey research is that it is invariably context-blind. However, in the social world, context and the environment in which questions are being asked and answers given is very important. For example, the responses of a female respondent being asked questions about gender equality in her home, in the presence of her husband and other family members, may be very different from the same questions asked at her work place where she is employed. Survey research can rarely see (he the questions of "context".

Reflection and Action 20.2

In his note on Social Surveys in the chapter, Producing Data, Mitchell (1984: 272) wrote,

Obviously, the constraints imposed upon data collection in normal survey work mean that the sort of information collected will be of a different quality from that collected by observation and by extended interviewing. Survey data are likely to provide estimates of the variability and extent of different patterns of association but they naturally do not lend themselves to following out leads or to exploring the cognitive and affective implications to the respondent of the links being studied.

Read the above excerpt from Mitchell's note and in the light of your reading of Unit 20, answer the following questions on a sheet of paper.

- i) What are the constraints imposed upon data collection in normal survey work?
- ii) Can you find an example of a survey that provides estimates of variability and extent of different patterns of association? For this purpose you may use issues of the Economic and Political Weekly and find an example of survey with the above material.
- iii) What does the term 'links' refer to in the above passage? Does it refer to data about networks in surveys?

20.8 Conclusion

Unit 20 aimed at familiarising you with survey method and its relevance in social research. Tracing the history of survey method, it elaborated on

the procedure of carrying out survey and pointed out both its advantages and weaknesses. Unit 20 has prepared adequate background for you to read the details of survey design, instrumentation and execution in the next three units of Block 5.

Further Reading

Moser, C. A. and G. Kalton 1973. *Survey Methods in Social Investigation.* The English Language Book Society: London

de Vaus, D.A. 1986. *Surveys in Social Research.* George Allen and Unwin: London

Young, P. V. 1988. *Scientific Social Surveys and Research.* New Delhi: Prentice Hall.

