Chapter 12
Social Survey Method

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Abstract The survey method is one of the most commonly used methods in all branches of social sciences research. Social survey research, which includes cross-sectional and longitudinal research, is best used to gain information about large populations and measure public attitudes and orientations in a large population. The motivation of the respondent and openness of the researchers is of utmost importance for survey research. The chapter will guide young researchers on how to clearly distinguish between the survey method and other methods used in social sciences research.

Introduction

The social survey remains one of the most commonly employed research techniques (Didier Marquis & Wiles-Portier, 2010), especially in social sciences, social work, and other pertinent areas including health, population services, and census. This method was initiated by British social reformers in the Victorian era to obtain data on poverty and labouring-class life (Converse, 2009; Kelley et al., 2003; Ponto, 2015; Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Social survey research is best used to gain information about large populations (Check & Schutt, 2012). Social surveys do not control for or manipulate the independent variables or the treatments. It is also a non-explanatory

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research design, as it uses a statistical test to measure variables and their relationship with others. Social surveys could capture beliefs, practices, or situations from a random sample using a survey questionnaire or structured interview (Bhattacherjee, 2012).

In conducting a survey, the researcher identifies the sample of respondents and administers a highly structured and straightforward questionnaire to obtain information for the data grid (Massey & Tourangeau, 2013; Rubin & Babbie, 2011). The survey method is a quantitative research tool, recognized for its structured collection of data about a population through the use of contemporary questions (Kendra, 2016). This chapter attempts to explain the method of social survey, its characteristics, types, significance, merits, demerits, and limitations.

Meanings and Definition of Survey Research

Although the social survey is a very old research technique, it is still one of the most favoured methods in social science study. A probability survey is best used to describe a pre-determined population using a small sample (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). Different researchers and methodology experts have defined social survey in different ways, which are discussed below:

According to Duncan Mitchell's Dictionary of Sociology, a social survey can be defined as "a systematic collection of facts about people living in a specific geographic, cultural or administrative area". Meanwhile, Bogardus described it as "the collection of data concerning the living and working conditions, broadly speaking of the people in a given community".

Another definition offered by the Oxford Dictionary is that a survey undertakes a close examination of someone or something: It also includes evaluating and recording the area and characteristics of (a land) to build a *map*, plan, or description: It assesses the ideas, experience, or behaviour of (a group of people) by questioning them.

Creswell (2009) and Babbie (2012) indicated that survey research quantitatively describes trends, behaviours, or opinions of a population-based on a sample study. Social survey research can be divided into cross-sectional and longitudinal studies; both studies rely on questions or structured interviews to obtain sample data, which can be generalized to a population. Furthermore, Kendra (2016) stressed that 'a survey may attempt to obtain factual information or opinions of respondents'.

Summarily, 'a survey is a method by which self-reported information of individuals is obtained'. De Vaus (2014) mentioned that the survey method refers to compiling information in an organized and scientific way from a few or all units of the population using distinct thoughts, procedures, and methods in a prescribed form. It is very useful when there is insufficient data. De Vaus also established that questionnaires, along with other methods like structured and in-depth interviews, content analysis, and observation, which are also used in the survey research, have been widely used for compiling data. Blackstone (2012) categorized the social survey

under a quantitative data collection method, where researchers use a set of a questionnaire for the sample, individuals or entire groups. The social survey approach is very effective for a large group of people or a large sample. This approach assists researchers to identify specific individuals or locations and capturing in-depth information about the population (Singleton & Straits, 2009). In this regard, as reflected by the various definitions above, a social survey is a method of collecting data consistently or systematically.

Characteristics of Social Survey

Similar to other research methods, survey research has some distinguishing features, which set it apart from other social research methods. Different social science research methodology experts have characterized the survey method with various characteristics (Jackson, 2011). Check and Schutt (2012) noted that, although the explanatory and measured variables in survey research are employed in the specification of the study scope, they cannot be explicitly controlled by the researcher. In this light, a social survey has three unique features, which are:

(a) In the majority of cases, the survey method is used in quantitative research design and in examining the relations between variables.
(b) In survey research, the required particular data is collected from people.
(c) During the survey, some portion of the sample has been selected to generalize the total population.

Phillips et al. (2013) highlighted that an effective survey method must satisfy the following criteria: measurable survey objectives, good research designs; clear survey question; reasonable sampling plan when needed; effective survey response strategy; and purposeful data summary, display and reporting. Employing a good survey design is important to ensure the alignment between surveys and social sciences. A well-designed survey should consider the demographic information of the targeted survey respondents (Ponto, 2015). The focus of the survey needs to be very clear; for example, a researcher intending to survey the health situations of garments workers of Bangladesh must have a specific view about the types of health problems he/she should focus on. The items in the questionnaire should be simple, clear, and free from jargon. It is good to avoid two-part questions, as some participants would only answer one part of the questions and leave the other part, and this could have some implications on the quality of the survey (Costanzo et al., 2012). In a close-ended questionnaire, it is useful to provide a section that allows comments from respondents. Questions should also be logically organized and presented in the questionnaire form and a logical sequence (Check & Schutt, 2012). The motivation of the respondent and openness of the researchers also contributes to the effectiveness of survey research (Farrell & Petersen, 2010).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Survey

The social survey method is the most commonly used research method in social sciences due to its applicability, general acceptability, and wide acceptance. On the other hand, there are also some limitations to this method (Chang & Krosnick, 2009). Table 12.1 shows major advantages and limitations of the social survey:

When and Why Social Survey Could Be Used in Social Research

Research can be categorized into three, namely *exploratory*, *descriptive*, and *causal*. Each research has unique features and outcomes, which will be used in certain ways. A social survey in social research is considered a descriptive and conclusive survey due to its quantitative nature (Didier Marquis & Wiles-Portier, 2010). Consequently, researchers are expected to direct pre-established questions to the entire group or sample of individuals, especially if they intend to delineate certain characteristics of a very large population or obtain particular information about them within a short period (Denscombe, 2010). In addition, the use of the survey method helps researchers to recognize particular persons or areas to obtain the data. Survey research, just like other methods of data collection, is suitable for responding to several forms of research questions such as defining an opinion, attitude, or behaviour held by a group of people and statistics of a given subject (Didier Marquis & Wiles-Portier, 2010).

There are four benefits of choosing the survey method. First, the survey method is less costly or more cost-effective compared to other survey methods. Second, the survey method is extensive and useful for gathering large data in a short period. Third, it is flexible and can be administered in different modes as mentioned earlier. Finally, it is also dependable, as the anonymity of the survey allows the respondent to answer more confidently, which could lead to more accurate data. Anonymity is the essence of survey research where it provides an avenue for more honest and unambiguous response than other types of research methodologies (Denscombe, 2010).

Types of Sampling

A sample can be defined as a group of respondents that are selected from and representative of a large population. The two types of sampling include probability and non-probability sampling.

- Probability sampling involves the selection of respondents based on probability theory. In other words, all individuals in the population have an equal chance of

Table 12.1 Advantages and disadvantages of social survey

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Due to the very structural form of its nature, a social survey is very easy to administer and use. This method can be administered via various modes, including in-person, door-to-door, regular electronic mail or even via telephone calls • The survey allows data to be collected from a large sample in a short period and it is easier to generalize responses from a large sample to the general population. Examples of surveys include population census and the crop census of Bangladesh, surveys are inclusive and require minimal investment. Surveys make it easier to collect abstract data like psychological data, which are difficult to collect through other methods like the case study or ethnographic method. However, it is important to note that surveys not only provide the exact measurement but also estimates for the true population (Ponto, 2015)	• Surveys are unsuitable to use when there is a requirement for obtaining historical context phenomena (Check & Schutt, 2012). For example, a researcher may be interested focused on historical events like the liberation war in Bangladesh • It is not possible to obtain sufficient information through relying on surveys and there is a need to use another research method such as case study, content analysis or in-depth interview • Another main weakness of the survey is related bias. Biases may occur either due to the lack of response from the survey respondents or due to the nature and accuracy of the responses that are received. For instance, in a study on income and satisfaction of garments workers in Bangladesh, the questions and responses should be related to issues on income and satisfaction and that the responses need to be well acquainted with the issue to avoid misleading responses (Denscombe, 2010) • Other sources of errors include intentional misreporting by the respondent as everyone wants to feel good and informative and hide actual behaviour and as a result, the survey data becomes faulty. In addition, respondents may have difficulty assessing their behaviour or have poor recall of the circumstances surrounding their behaviour. This type of error or problem is more profound in studies using the cross-sectional survey method • The non-response and social desirability bias could create potential challenges in the use of the survey method. Non-responses are mostly related to structured and written surveys and it is frequently reported in mail and telephone surveys. However, social science methodology experts suggested the response rate of 85% or more is considered as very good while anything below 60% might severely impact the representativeness of the sample (Kendra, 2016) • Social desirability bias is when people respond in a way that makes them look better than they are. For example, a respondent might report that they engage in healthier behaviours than they do in real life (Farrell & Petersen, 2010). In addition, respondents in a study on the domestic stand might show that they believe in the desirable family and cultural values, but in real life, the person himself is in engaging in domestic violence

Table 12.2 Main differences between cross-sectional and longitudinal studies

Features	Cross-sectional	Longitudinal studies
Timeline	One point of time	Multiple points of time
Sample types	Different (fresh sample each time)	Same sample
Results	Deliver snapshot in a given point of time	Provides details of changes over time

being selected (Massey & Tourangeau, 2013). The probability sampling method uses random sample techniques for the selection of samples.

- Non-probability sampling is a technique that uses non-random or convenient sampling.

Types of Social Survey

In line with the extant studies and from the practical perspective, we can divide the survey methods into various categories. The type of social survey to be used could be determined by the time allocation and how the survey is being administrated. For instance, when and what frequencies surveys are being administered and carried out on the respondents. In most cases, survey-based studies could be categorized into cross-sectional and longitudinal. A cross-sectional study is performed at a snapshot. This type of survey provides investigators with a generalized view of the time and events pertinent to issues being studied and are usually based on the past experiences of the respondents (Blackstone, 2012). In this light, the limitations of cross-sectional surveys could be minimized by implementing longitudinal surveys. The main differences between cross-sectional and longitudinal studies are presented in Table 12.2.

The Social Survey Life Cycle

Project leads may be responsible for supervising the work and ensuring the association between people and the elements of the social survey life cycles.

Study design and organizational structure: This encompasses establishing the research problems, research's aims and objectives, attainable resources, funding source for a survey, study type (cross-sectional or panel), study duration, numbers of the interview, capacity of research and available infrastructure in the major areas (presence of sampling frames, field staff and technical systems) and data collection procedure (Hibben et al., 2016, p. 6).

Study management: This entails establishing requirements, tackling the demands, worries and expectations of stakeholders, securing effective communication means,

neutralizing contending challenges, and concluding major procedures and phases of the project (Scott et al., 2016, p. 34). The steps of study management are shown in Table 12.3 and the social survey lifecycle in Fig. 12.1.

> **Box 12.1: Common types of longitudinal studies**
>
> Trend survey: This is performed by researchers whose interest is to examine the dynamics of people's inclinations
> Panel survey: This involves repeated assessment of the same households or individuals at different points in time. Examples of panel surveys are the Living Standards Measurement (LSMS) of the World Bank, Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) of USAID and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys of UNICEF
> Cohort survey: This involves monitoring and recording the behaviours of groups of individuals exposed to similar life events in a given period
> Retrospective survey: This type of survey compares a group of people with a disease or condition under study (cases) with another group without the disease or condition (controls)

Longitudinal surveys, which include trend, panel, cohort, and retrospective surveys, facilitate researchers' examination of an issue for a long time. In conducting a trend survey, the researcher will observe or examine a change in trend over time. It is noteworthy that participation of the same people is not required in a trend survey (Ponto, 2015). One example of this form of study is a survey to observe rainfall trends or decreasing underground water in the northern part of Bangladesh. The key variable here is the trend, rather than a particular people or community. As for the panel survey, it is conducted with the same people (panel) over time, and data are collected from a sequence of interviews (Jackson, 2011). For example, in a survey that focuses on youth and extremism in Bangladesh, 100 youth will be interviewed each year or every 3 or 5 years. The researcher will need to trace the respondents' behaviours and lifestyles including their residence, employment, course of study, daily activities, etc. While this could be a huge task and involve a large number of resources and time-consuming, the result could be powerful.

Another form of longitudinal study is the cohort study. This form of study recognizes several categories of people, and researchers need to frequently collect information from them. In this light, each respondent should meet the criteria for research, and the same people don't need to participate each year. In a cohort study, a researcher may include people from the same generation, born in the same year, received the same education, have similar qualifications, work in the same place, have the same profession and share common life experiences (Denscombe, 2010; Ponto et al., 2010). For example, if a researcher's research interest is on female garments workers or the work environment in the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) in Bangladesh, then he or she will survey the cohort of female garments workers or those working in EPZ.

Table 12.3 Steps of study management

| Steps of study management	
1. *Tenders, bids and contracts* • Prepare tenders with detailed requirements • Conduct a bidding process and select survey organizations • Negotiate and execute contracts 2. *Sample design* • Define the target population and determine the sample size • Identify the sampling frame • Implement a selection procedure 3. *Questionnaire design* • Select a comparative question design approach • Develop protocols for evaluating questions • Adopt questions, adapt questions 4. *Adaptation and translation* • Identify adaptation needs • Modify the questionnaire content, format or visual presentation • Adapt design features • Find, select and brief translators • Use existing or develop translation tools • Complete language harmonization 5. *Instrument technical design* • Develop design specifications for instruments and a sample management system • Develop interface design and programming guidelines • Determine testing specifications • Determine reporting specifications 6. *Interviewer recruitment, selection and training* • Determine required characteristics of interviewers • Recruit and hire interviewers • Select interviewer trainers • Create a training plan and determine the necessary training materials which may involve identifying existing materials or preparing new training materials	7. *Presetting and data collection* • Determine the appropriate pretest method and design • Conduct a pilot study • Pretest the survey instrument with the target population • Select the appropriate data collection mode and develop procedures for that mode • Establish a protocol for managing the survey sample • Manage data collection and quality control • Consider potential risks and necessary backup plans if goals are not met 8. *Para data and other auxiliary* • Investigate the para data /auxiliary data available and informative to survey errors • Choose appropriate para data indicators for survey error and monitor the indicators starting at the initial phases of data collection • Implement interventions by altering the active features of the survey in subsequent phases or at real-time of the data collection based on cost/error tradeoff decision rules • Perform analysis using para data to investigate survey errors 9. *Data harmonization* • Determine a harmonization strategy • Determine the technical specifications of the system used for data harmonization • Use a systematic approach to harmonize variables • Compare and integrate information across data files 10. *Data processing and statistical adjustment* • Code survey responses and enter them into electronic form • Edit and clean data • Define data quality checks • Develop survey weights 11. *Data dissemination* • Preserve key data and documentation files • Produce public- and restricted-use data files • Prepare final data deliverables and reports 12. *Statistical analysis* • Apply statistical procedures to data files

Sources Scott et al. (2016, p. 38)
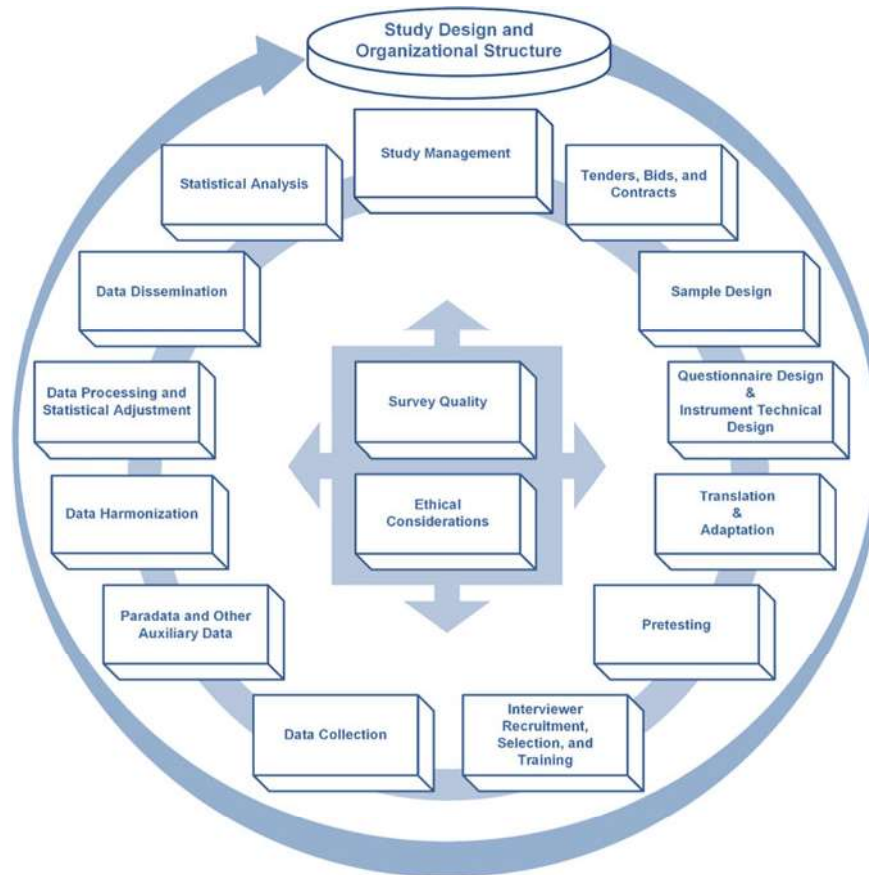
Fig. 12.1 The social survey lifecycle. *Source* Survey Research Center (2016)

A retrospective survey is a type of longitudinal study that compares two groups of people. It is conducted only once like a cross-sectional study. This kind of study emphasizes the existing data obtained from the respondents rather than conducting new research. The researcher will evaluate the respondent's past beliefs, behaviour, and experiences within a short period. Hence, this form of study is cheaper to conduct. However, it is important to consider that the respondents' past beliefs may differ from their current beliefs and the respondents may have little memory of what they experienced before. For instance, research can survey where, how, and with whom the respondents spent their *Pahela Baishak* (the first day of Bengali New Year). As *Pahela Baishak* is celebrated every year, there might be chances that their recollection could be incorrect.

Table 12.4 presents the merits and demerits of interview, self-administered, telephone, mail, and online surveys. As discussed above, whether the survey falls into cross-sectional or longitudinal surveys depends on the time and frequencies of the

survey being administered. Another important consideration in choosing a survey is how it is being administrated (Dillman et al., 2009). The most common survey type is self-administered surveys (not very common or usual practice in Bangladesh, but very common in Europe and America), which use self-administered questionnaires. A self-administered questionnaire (SAQ) allows respondents to answer the survey questionnaire without intervention from the research (Lavrakas, 2008). Hard copies of self-administered questionnaires can be sent to the respondents either using regular mail or e-mail. The researcher will ask the respondents to fill out the questionnaire directly or allocate a specific time for the respondents to respond to and return the completed questionnaire (Costanzo et al., 2012). In this regard, researchers have started to favour online surveys instead of door-to-door surveys. In some cases, the survey questions will be read by the researchers instead of asking the respondents to read them themselves. This kind of survey is the most prevalent in Bangladesh due to a high illiteracy rate. Another form of survey is an interview survey where an interview is conducted to collect information from two or more persons. This process is usually guided by a questionnaire or an interview guideline. However, the interview is time-consuming, and special skills and training are needed for those taking the role of the interviewer (Bhattacherjee, 2012). The interview can be conducted either by telephone or face to face. A researcher could use closed-ended questions, whereby the researcher limits the response choice or utilizes open-ended questions, which lack any option for the respondent, thus giving respondents the choice to answer the questions in their own words (Farrell & Petersen, 2010). Based on the aforementioned exposition, the researcher is required to understand the characteristics of the study population so that he/she could identify the appropriate mechanism to deliver the survey.

Role of Interviewer

The interview is a complex and multifaceted issue; therefore, the interviewer should play an important role in the following tasks (Bhattacherjee, 2012, p. 79):

- *Interview preparation*: In survey research, the interviewer is the principal actor for collecting quality data. Hence, the interviewer should be well trained and skilful to conduct a successful interview.
- *Identify location and schedule*: The interviewer should identify the location and ensure the interview is conducted at a convenient time for the respondents.
- *Motivate respondents*: The interviewer must clarify the importance and objective of the research to motivate respondents to participate in the study.
- *Clarify any questions or concerns*: The interviewer should explain clearly any questions or concerns raised by the respondents for them to understand the subject matters.
- *Observe the quality of response*: The interviewer is the main judge to check the quality of collected information.

Table 12.4 Advantages and disadvantages of interview surveys, self-administered surveys, telephone surveys, mail surveys and online surveys

Survey method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Interview surveys	• The researcher fills out the questionnaire themselves rather than asking respondents • The response rate is much higher, more valid data • The interviewer can clarify questions easily • The presence of the interviewer encourages participation	• Special interviewing skills are essential for conducting the interview • Sample size limited • Interviewer bias possible • More labour requires for large geographic areas • High cost • Time-consuming
Self-administered surveys	• No interviewer to recruit, no training • Cheap and essay to administer • Reach to a large population • Essay to coverage geographic areas • No influence by the interviewer	• Low response rate • Self-selection bias • Slow form of collection • More skipped question, misunderstanding and more mistake
Telephone surveys	• Wide coverage • High response rate • Better communication • Reduce the rate of data error • Familiarity with telephone technology • Efficient data collection and storage	• More expensive • Sampling bias • No visual communication. Limited interview length • Unreliable telephone access in some areas
Mail surveys	• Wide coverage • Low cost • Avoid interviewer bias • Respondents get ample time to answer • A sample might be hard to reach	• Good reading and writing skills are required by respondents • Requires simple question • No control over with respondents
Online surveys	• Easy access to a large population • Reduced cost • Higher response rate • Higher flexibility • Essay administration • Reduce time and error of data entry	• Costly for the interviewer • Lower response rate • Requires higher literacy • Multiple responses from the same person

Conclusions

The social survey remains one of the most effective and popular methods of investigation in the social sciences. The social survey is a structured method of data collection and can be categorized into cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys. A cross-sectional survey is usually conducted once. However, some respondents are

unable to link responses with his/her past, which might lead to insufficient results. Therefore, social survey methods involve several steps, including identification of the study problems and objectives; determination of the sample selection frame and design; preparation of the questionnaire; collection, processing and analysis of data; dissemination of results; and preparation of the final report. It is worthy of note that the application of social survey methods should be preceded by the researcher's establishment of research design, study objectives, and study questions.

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