CHAPTER 7

Survey Research

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Some 6 months after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a small group of students at Hamilton College and their professor, Dennis Gilbert (2002), conducted a nationwide survey of American Muslims. The survey found that nearly 75% of the respondents either knew someone who had, or had themselves, experienced anti-Muslim discrimination since the attacks. "You are demons," "Pig religion," "You guys did it," some were told. Respondents described actions such as "He spit in my face," "He pulled off my daughter's hajib [her head covering]"—the list of abuses went on. In all, 517 American Muslims were contacted, through a careful sampling procedure, and were interviewed via telephone by Gilbert's students and by employees of the Zogby International polling firm. This survey provided a snapshot of the views of an important segment of American society.

In this chapter, we will use the "Muslim America" project, a "youth and guns" survey also done by Gilbert, and other surveys to illustrate some key features of survey research. We explain the major steps in questionnaire design and then consider the features of four types of surveys, highlighting the unique problems attending each one and suggesting some possible solutions. (For instance, how do we develop an initial list—a sampling frame—of American Muslims?) We discuss ethics issues in the final section. By the chapter's end, you should be well on your way to becoming an informed consumer of survey reports and a knowledgeable developer of survey designs.

WHY IS SURVEY RESEARCH SO POPULAR?

Survey research collects information from a *sample of individuals* through their responses to *standardized questions*. As you probably have observed, a great many social scientists rely on surveys as their primary method of data collection. In fact, surveys have become so common that we cannot evaluate much of what we read in the newspaper or see on TV without having some understanding of this method of data collection (Converse, 1984).

> ***Survey research:*** Research in which information is collected from a sample of individuals through their responses to a set of standardized questions

Survey research owes its popularity to three advantages: versatility, efficiency, and generalizability. The *versatility* of surveys is apparent in the wide range of uses to which they are put, including opinion polls, election campaigns, marketing surveys, community needs assessments, and program evaluations. Surveys are *efficient* because they are a relatively fast means of collecting data on a wide range of issues at relatively little cost—ranging from about $10 to $15 per respondent in mailed surveys of the general population to $30 for a telephone survey and then as much as $300 for in-person interview surveys (from January 7, 1998, personal communication with Floyd J. Fowler of the Center for Survey Research, University of Massachusetts, Boston; see also Dillman, 1982/1991; Groves & Kahn, 1979/1991). Because they can be widely distributed to representative samples (see Chapter 5), surveys also help in achieving *generalizable* results.

Perhaps the most efficient type of survey is an **omnibus survey**, which includes a range of topics of interest to different social scientists or to other sponsors. The General Social Survey (GSS) of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago is a prime example of an omnibus survey. It is a 90-minute interview administered biennially to a probability sample of almost 3,000 Americans, with a wide range of questions and topic areas chosen by a board of overseers. The resulting datasets are made available to many universities, instructors, and students (Davis & Smith, 1992; National Opinion Research Center, 1992).

> ***Omnibus survey:*** A survey that covers a range of topics of interest to different social scientists

HOW SHOULD WE WRITE SURVEY QUESTIONS?

Questions are the centerpiece of survey research, so selecting good questions is the single most important concern for survey researchers. All hope for achieving measurement validity is lost unless the questions in a survey are clear and convey the intended meaning to respondents.

Question writing for a particular survey might begin with a brainstorming session or a review of previous surveys. The Muslim America survey began with students formulating questions with help from Muslim students and professors. Most professionally prepared surveys contain previously used questions as well as some new ones, but every question that is considered for inclusion must be reviewed carefully for clarity and for its ability to convey the intended meaning to the respondents.

Adherence to the following basic principles will go a long way toward ensuring clear and meaningful questions.

Be Clear; Avoid Confusing Phrasing

In most cases, a *simple, direct approach* to asking a question minimizes confusion ("Overall, do you enjoy living in Ohio?"). Use shorter rather than longer words and sentences: *brave* rather than *courageous*; *job concerns* rather than *work-related employment issues* (Dillman, 2000:52). On the other hand, questions shouldn't be abbreviated so much that the results are ambiguous. The simple statement,

Residential location: _____

is *too* simple. Does it ask for town? Country? Street address? In contrast, asking, "In what city or town do you live?" focuses attention clearly on a specific geographic unit, a specific time, and a specific person.

Avoid *negative phrases or words*, especially **double negatives**: "Do you disagree that there should not be a tax increase?" Respondents have a hard time figuring out which response matches their sentiments. Such errors can easily be avoided with minor wording changes, but even experienced survey researchers can make this mistake.

> ***Double negative:*** A question or statement that contains two negatives, which can muddy the meaning of the question

Avoid **double-barreled questions**; these actually ask two questions but allow only one answer. For instance, "Our business uses reviews and incentive plans to drive employee behavior. Do you agree or disagree?" What if the business uses only reviews? How should respondents answer? Double-barreled questions can lead to dramatically misleading results. For example, during the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, the Gallup poll asked, "Do

you think President Nixon should be impeached and compelled to leave the presidency, or not?" Only about a third of Americans said yes. But when the wording was changed to ask whether President Nixon should be brought to trial before the Senate, more than half answered yes. The first version combined impeachment—trial—with conviction and may have confused people (Kagay, 1992:E5).

> ***Double-barreled question:*** A single survey question that actually asks two questions but allows only one answer

It is also important to identify clearly what kind of information each question is to obtain. Some questions focus on attitudes, or on what people say they want or how they feel. Some questions focus on beliefs, or what people think is true. Some questions focus on behavior, or on what people do. And some questions focus on attributes, or on what people are like or have experienced (Dillman, 1978:79–118; Gordon, 1992). Rarely can a single question effectively address more than one of these dimensions at a time.

Minimize Bias

The words used in survey questions should not trigger biases, unless doing so is the researcher's conscious intent. Biased words and phrases tend to produce misleading answers. Some polls ask obviously loaded questions, such as "Isn't it time for Americans to stand up for morality and stop the shameless degradation of the airwaves?" Especially when describing abstract ideas (e.g., "freedom," "justice," "fairness"), your choice of words can dramatically affect how respondents answer. Take the difference between "welfare" and "assistance for the poor." On average, surveys have found that public support for "more assistance for the poor" is about *39 percentage points higher* than for "welfare" (Smith, 1987). Most people favor helping the poor; most people oppose welfare. The "truly needy" gain our sympathy, but "loafers and bums" do not.

Sometimes responses can be distorted through the lack of good alternative answers. For example, the Detroit Area Study (Turner & Martin, 1984:252) asked the following question: "People feel differently about making changes in the way our country is run. In order to keep America great, which of these statements do you think is best?" When the only two response choices were "We should be very cautious of making changes," or "We should be free to make changes," only 37% said that we should be free to make changes. However, when a stronger response choice was added suggesting that we should "constantly" make changes, 24% chose that response and another 32% still chose the "free to make changes" response. So instead of 37%, we now had a total of 56% who seemed open to making changes in the way our country is run (Turner & Martin:252). Including the more extreme positive alternative ("constantly" make changes) made the less extreme positive alternative more attractive.

To minimize biased responses, researchers have to test reactions to the phrasing of a question.

Allow for Disagreement

Some respondents tend to "agree" with a statement just to avoid disagreeing. In a sense, they want to be helpful. You can see the impact of this human tendency in a 1974 Michigan Survey Research Center survey about crime and lawlessness in the United States (Schuman & Presser, 1981). When one question stated that individuals were more to blame for crime than were social conditions, 60% of the respondents agreed. But when the question was rephrased so respondents were asked, "In general, do you believe that individuals or social conditions are more to blame for crime and lawlessness in the United States?" only 46% chose individuals.

As a rule, you should present both sides of attitude scales in the question itself (Dillman, 2000:61–62). The response choices themselves should be phrased to make each one seem as socially approved, as "agreeable," as the others.

Most people, for instance, won't openly admit to having committed a crime or other disreputable activities. In this situation, you should write questions that make agreement seem more acceptable. Rather than ask, "Have you ever shoplifted something from a store?" Dillman (2000:75) suggests "Have you ever taken anything from a store without paying for it?" Asking about a range of behaviors or attitudes can also facilitate agreeing with those that are socially unacceptable.

Don't Ask Questions They Can't Answer

Respondents should be *competent* to answer questions. Too many surveys expect accurate answers from people who couldn't reasonably know the answers. One campus survey we've seen asked professors to agree or disagree with statements such as the following:

"Minority students are made to feel they are second-class citizens."

"The Campus Center does a good job of meeting the informal needs of students."

"The Campus Center is where students go to meet one another and socialize informally."

"Alcohol contributes to casual sex among students."

But of course, most professors are in no position to know the answers to these questions about students' lives. To know what students do or feel, one should ask students, not professors. You should also realize that memory isn't a perfect tool—most of us, for instance, cannot accurately report what we ate for lunch on a Tuesday 2 weeks ago. To get accurate lunch information, ask about today's meal.

Sometimes your survey itself can sort people by competence so that they answer the appropriate questions. For instance, if you include a question about job satisfaction in a survey of the general population, first ask respondents whether they have a job. These **filter questions** create **skip patterns**. For example, respondents who answer no to one question are directed to skip ahead to another question, but respondents who answer yes go on to the **contingent question**. Skip patterns should be indicated clearly, as demonstrated in Exhibit 7.1.

Filter question: A survey question used to identify a subset of respondents who then are asked other questions

Skip pattern: The unique combination of questions created in a survey by filter questions and contingent questions

Contingent question: A question that is asked of only a subset of survey respondents

Allow for Uncertainty

Some respondents just don't know—about your topic, about their own feelings, about what they think. Or they like to be neutral and won't take a stand on anything. Or they don't have any information. All of these choices are OK, but you should recognize and allow for them.

Many people, for instance, are **floaters**: respondents who choose a substantive answer even when they really don't know. Asked for their opinion on a law of which they're completely ignorant, a third of the public will give an opinion anyway, if "Don't know" isn't an option. But if it *is* an option, 90% of that group will pick that answer. You should give them the chance to say that they don't know (Schuman & Presser, 1981:113–160).

Floaters: Survey respondents who provide an opinion on a topic in response to a closed-ended question that does not include a "Don't know" option but who will choose "Don't know" if it is available

Because there are so many floaters in the typical survey sample, the decision to include an explicit "Don't know" option for a question is important, especially with surveys of less

EXHIBIT 7.1 Filter Questions and Skip Patterns

9. (GUNSHOT) Not including military combat, have you or anyone close to you ever been shot by a gun?

   1. Yes 2. No (**skip to 11**) 3. Not sure (**do not read**)

10. (OPENSHOT) Could you explain the circumstances? _____

11. (GUNLAWS) In general, do you feel that laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict, less strict, or kept as they are now?

    1. More strict
    2. Less strict
    3. Kept as are
    4. Not sure (**do not read**)

educated populations. "Don't know" responses are chosen more often by those with less education (Schuman & Presser, 1981:113–146). Unfortunately, the inclusion of an explicit "Don't know" response choice also allows some people who *do* have a preference to take the easy way out and choose "Don't know."

Fence-sitters, people who see themselves as being neutral, may skew the results if you force them to choose between opposites. In most cases, about 10% to 20% of respondents—those who do not have strong feelings on an issue—will choose an explicit middle, neutral alternative (Schuman & Presser, 1981:161–178). Adding an explicit neutral response option is appropriate when you want to find out who is a fence-sitter.

> ***Fence-sitters:*** Survey respondents who see themselves as being neutral on an issue and choose a middle (neutral) response that is offered

Fence-sitting and floating can be managed by including an explicit "no opinion" category after all the substantive responses. If neutral sentiment is a possibility, also include a neutral category in the middle of the substantive responses (such as "neither agree nor disagree") (Dillman, 2000:58–60). Finally, adding an open-ended question in which respondents are asked to discuss their opinions (or reasons for having no opinion) can help by shedding some light on why some persons choose "Don't know" in response to a particular question (Smith, 1984).

Make Response Categories Exhaustive and Mutually Exclusive

Questions with fixed response choices must provide one and only one possible response for everyone who is asked the question. First, all of the possibilities should be offered (choices should be "exhaustive"). In one survey of employees who were quitting their jobs at a telecommunications company, respondents were given these choices for "Why are you leaving [the company]?": (a) poor pay, (b) poor working environment, (c) poor benefits, or (d) poor relations with my boss. Clearly, there may be other reasons (e.g., family or health reasons, geographical preferences) to leave an employer. The response categories were not exhaustive. Or when asking college students their class (senior, junior, etc.), you should probably consider having an "other" category for nontraditional matriculants who may be on an unusual track.

Second, response choices shouldn't overlap—they should be mutually exclusive so that picking one rules out picking another. If I say, for instance, that I'm 25 years old, I cannot also be 50 years old; but I may claim to be both "young" and "mature." Those two choices aren't mutually exclusive, so they shouldn't be used as response categories for a question about age.

There are two exceptions to these principles: Filter questions may tell some respondents to skip over a question (the response choices do not have to be exhaustive), and respondents may be asked to "check all that apply" (the response choices are not mutually exclusive). Even these exceptions should be kept to a minimum. Respondents to a self-administered questionnaire should not have to do a lot of "skipping around," or else they may lose interest

in completing carefully all the applicable questions. And some survey respondents react to a "check all that apply" request by just checking enough responses so that they feel they have "done enough" for that question and then ignoring the rest of the choices (Dillman, 2000:63).

HOW SHOULD QUESTIONNAIRES BE DESIGNED?

Survey questions are asked as part of a **questionnaire** (or **interview schedule**, in interview-based studies); they are not isolated from other questions. The context created by the questionnaire as a whole has a major impact on how individual questions are interpreted and answered. Therefore, survey researchers must carefully design the questionnaire itself, not just each individual question. Several steps, explained in the following sections, will help you design a good questionnaire.

Questionnaire: A survey instrument containing the questions in a self-administered survey

Interview schedule: A survey instrument containing the questions asked by the interviewer in an in-person or phone survey

Build on Existing Instruments

If another researcher has already designed a set of questions to measure a key concept and previous surveys indicate that this measure is reliable and valid, then by all means use that instrument. Resources such as the *Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurement, 6th edition* (Miller & Salkind, 2002), can give you many ideas about existing questionnaires; your literature review at the start of a research project should be an even better source.

But there is a tradeoff here. Questions used previously may not concern quite the right concept or may not be appropriate in some ways for your population. A good rule of thumb is to use a previously designed instrument if it measures the concept of concern to you and it seems appropriate for your survey population.

Refine and Test Questions

The only good question is a pretested question. Before you rely on a question in your research, you need evidence that your respondents will understand what it means. So try it out on a few people (Dillman, 2000:140–147).

One important form of pretesting is discussing the questionnaire with colleagues. You can also review prior research in which your key questions or indexes have been used. Another increasingly popular form of pretesting comes from guided discussions among potential respondents. Such "focus groups" let you check for consistent understanding of terms and identify the range of events or experiences about which people will be asked to report (Fowler, 1995). (See Chapter 9 for more about this technique.)

Professional survey researchers have also developed a technique for evaluating questions called the **cognitive interview** (Fowler, 1995). Although the specifics vary, the basic approach is to ask people to "think aloud" as they answer questions. The researcher asks a test question and then probes with follow-up questions to learn how the question was understood and whether its meaning varied for different respondents. This method can identify many potential problems.

> ***Cognitive interview:*** A technique for evaluating questions in which researchers ask people test questions, then probe with follow-up questions to learn how they understood the question and what their answers mean

Conducting a pilot study is the final stage of questionnaire preparation. For the Muslim America study, students placed 550 telephone calls and in the process learned (a) the extent of fear that many respondents felt about such a poll; (b) that females were, for cultural reasons, less likely to respond in surveys of the Muslim population; and (c) that some of their questions were worded ambiguously.

To do a pilot study, draw a small sample of individuals from the population you are studying or one very similar to it (it is best to draw a sample of at least 100 respondents) and carry out the survey procedures with them. You may include in the pretest version of a written questionnaire some space for individuals to add comments on each key question or, with in-person interviews, audiotape the test interviews for later review. Review the distribution of responses to each question and revise any that respondents do not seem to understand.

A survey researcher also can try to understand what respondents mean by their responses after the fact—that is, by including additional questions in the survey itself. Adding such **interpretive questions** after key survey questions is always a good idea, but it is of utmost importance when the questions in a survey have not been thoroughly pretested (Labaw, 1980).

> ***Interpretive questions:*** Questions included in a questionnaire or interview schedule to help explain answers to other important questions

Maintain Consistent Focus

A survey (with the exception of an omnibus survey) should be guided by a clear conception of the research problem under investigation and the population to be sampled. Remember to have measures of all of the independent and dependent variables you plan to use. Of course, not even the best researcher can anticipate the relevance of every question. Researchers tend to try to avoid "missing something" by erring on the side of extraneous questions (Labaw, 1980:40).

At the same time, respondents are dismayed by long lists of redundant or unimportant questions, so respect their time and make sure that each question counts. Surveys too often include too many irrelevant questions.

Order the Questions

The sequence of questions on a survey matters. As a first step, the individual questions should be sorted into broad thematic categories, which then become separate sections in the questionnaire. Both the sections and the questions within the sections must then be organized in a logical order that would make sense in a conversation.

The first question deserves special attention, particularly if the questionnaire is to be self-administered. This question signals to the respondent what the survey is about, whether it will be interesting, and how easy it will be to complete ("Overall, would you say your physical health right now is excellent, good, fair, or poor?") The first question should be connected to the primary purpose of the survey, it should be interesting, it should be easy, and it should apply to everyone in the sample (Dillman, 2000:92–94). Don't try to jump right into sensitive issues ("In general, how well do you think your marriage is working?"); respondents have to "warm up" before they will be ready for such questions. As a standard practice, for instance, most researchers ask any questions about income or finances near the end of a survey, because many people are cautious about discussing such matters.

Question order can lead to **context effects** when one or more questions influence how subsequent questions are interpreted (Schober, 1999:89–98). The potential for context effects is greatest when two or more questions concern the same issue or closely related issues. For example, if an early question asks respondents to state for whom they plan to vote in an election, they may hesitate in later questions to support views that are clearly not those of that candidate. In general, people try to appear consistent (even if they are not); be sensitive to this and realize that earlier questions may "commit" respondents to answers on later questions.

> ***Context effects:*** In survey research, refers to the influence that earlier questions may have on how subsequent questions are answered

Make the Questionnaire Attractive

An attractive questionnaire—neat, clear, clean, and spacious—is more likely to be completed and less likely to confuse either the respondent or, in an interview, the interviewer.

An attractive questionnaire does not look cramped; plenty of "white space"—more between questions than within question components—makes the questionnaire appear easy to complete. Response choices are listed vertically and are distinguished clearly and consistently, perhaps by formatting them in all capital letters and keeping them in the middle of the page. Skip patterns are indicated with arrows or other graphics. Some distinctive type of formatting should be used to identify instructions. Printing a multipage questionnaire in booklet form usually results in the most attractive and simple-to-use questionnaire (Dillman, 2000:80–86).

Exhibit 7.2 contains portions of a telephone interview questionnaire that illustrates these features, making it easy for the interviewer to use.

EXHIBIT 7.2 Sample Interview Guide

Hi, my name is _____. I am calling on behalf of (I am a student at) Hamilton College in New York. We are conducting a national opinion poll of high school students.

SCREENER: Is there a sophomore, junior, or senior in high school in your household with whom I may speak?

1. Yes 2. No/not sure/refuse **(End)**

(If student not on phone, ask:) Could he or she come to the phone?

(When student is on the phone) Hi, my name is _____. I am calling on behalf of (I am a student at) Hamilton College in New York. We are conducting a national opinion poll of high school students about gun control. Your answers will be completely anonymous. Would you be willing to participate in the poll?

1. Yes 2. No/not sure/refuse **(End)**

1. (SKOLYR) What year are you in school?
   1. Sophomore
   2. Junior
   3. Senior
   4. Not sure/refuse **(do not read) (End)**

Now some questions about your school:

2. (SKOL) Is it a public, Catholic, or private school?
   1. Public 2. Catholic 3. Private 4. Not sure **(do not read)**

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES FOR ADMINISTERING SURVEYS?

Surveys can be administered in at least five different ways. They can be *mailed* or *group-administered* or conducted *by telephone*, *in person*, or *electronically*. (Exhibit 7.3 summarizes the typical features of each.) Each approach differs from the others in one or more important features:

- *Manner of administration*—Mailed, group, and electronic surveys are completed by the respondents themselves. During phone and in-person interviews, however, the researcher or a staff person asks the questions and records the respondent's answers.
- *Questionnaire structure*—Most mailed, group, phone, and electronic surveys are highly structured, fixing in advance the content and order of questions and response choices. In-person interviews may be highly structured, but they also may include many questions without fixed response choices.

EXHIBIT 7.3 Typical Features of the Five Survey Designs

Design	*Manner of Administration*	*Setting*	*Questionnaire Structure*	*Cost*
Mailed survey	Self	Individual	Mostly structured	Low
Group survey	Self	Group	Mostly structured	Very low
Phone survey	Professional	Individual	Structured	Moderate
In-person interview	Professional	Individual or unstructured	Structured	High
Electronic survey	Self	Individual	Mostly structured	Very low

- *Setting*—Mailed, electronic, and phone interviews are usually intended for only one respondent. The same is usually true of in-person interviews, although sometimes researchers interview several family members at once. On the other hand, some surveys are distributed simultaneously to a group of respondents, who complete the survey while the researcher (or assistant) waits.
- *Cost*—As mentioned earlier, in-person interviews are clearly the most expensive type of survey. Phone interviews are much less expensive, and surveying by mail is cheaper yet. Electronic surveys are now the least expensive method, because there are no interviewer costs; no mailing costs; and, for many designs, almost no costs for data entry. (Of course, extra staff time and expertise are required to prepare an electronic questionnaire.)

Because of their different features, the five administrative options vary in the types of error to which they are most prone and the situations in which they are most appropriate. The rest of this section focuses on each format's unique advantages and disadvantages.

Mailed, Self-Administered Surveys

A **mailed (self-administered) survey** is conducted by mailing a questionnaire to respondents, who then take the survey by themselves. The central problem for a mailed survey is maximizing the response rate. Even an attractive questionnaire with clear questions will probably be returned by no more than 30% of a sample unless extra steps are taken. A response rate of 30%, of course, is a disaster, destroying any hope of a representative sample. That's because people who *do* respond are often systematically different from people who *don't* respond—women respond more often, for instance, to most surveys; people with very strong opinions respond more than those who are indifferent; very wealthy and very poor people, for different reasons, are less likely to respond.

Mailed (self-administered) survey: A survey involving a mailed questionnaire to be completed by the respondent

Fortunately, the conscientious use of systematic techniques can push the response rate to 70% or higher for most mailed surveys (Dillman, 2000:27), which is acceptable. Sending follow-up mailings to nonrespondents is the single most important technique for obtaining an adequate response rate. The follow-up mailings explicitly encourage initial nonrespondents to return a completed questionnaire; implicitly, they convey the importance of the effort. Dillman (155–158, 177–188) has demonstrated the effectiveness of a standard procedure for the mailing process: a preliminary introductory letter, a well-packaged survey mailing with a personalized cover letter, a reminder postcard 2 weeks after the initial mailing, and then new cover letters and replacement questionnaires 2 to 4 weeks and 6 to 8 weeks after that mailing.

The **cover letter**, actually, is critical to the success of a mailed survey. This statement to respondents sets the tone for the entire questionnaire. The cover letter or introductory statement must establish the credibility of the research and the researcher, it must be personalized (including a personal salutation and an original signature), it should be interesting to read, and it must explain issues about voluntary participation and maintaining subject confidentiality (Dillman, 1978:165–172). A carefully prepared cover letter should increase the response rate and result in more honest and complete answers to the survey questions; a poorly prepared cover letter can have the reverse effects. Exhibit 7.4 is an example of a cover letter for a questionnaire.

Cover letter: The letter sent with a mailed questionnaire. It explains the survey's purpose and auspices and encourages the respondent to participate.

Other steps that help to maximize the response rate include clear and understandable questions, not many open-ended questions, a credible research sponsor, a token incentive (such as a $1 coupon), and presurvey advertising (Fowler, 1988:99–106; Mangione, 1995:79–82).

Group-Administered Surveys

A **group-administered survey** is completed by individual respondents assembled in a group. The response rate is usually high because most group members will participate. Unfortunately, this method is seldom feasible because it requires a captive audience. With the exception of students, employees, members of the armed forces, and some institutionalized populations, most people cannot be sampled in such a setting.

Group-administered survey: A survey that is completed by individual respondents who are assembled in a group

EXHIBIT 7.4 Sample Questionnaire Cover Letter

University of Massachusetts at Boston
Department of Sociology
May 24, 2009

Jane Doe
AIDS Coordinator
Shattuck Shelter

Dear Jane:

AIDS is an increasing concern for homeless people and for homeless shelters. The enclosed survey is about the AIDS problem and related issues confronting shelters. It is sponsored by the Life Lines AIDS Prevention Project for the Homeless—a program of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

As an AIDS coordinator/shelter director, you have learned about homeless persons' problems and about implementing programs in response to those problems. The Life Lines Project needs to learn from your experience. Your answers to the questions in the enclosed survey will improve substantially the base of information for improving AIDS prevention programs.

Questions in the survey focus on AIDS prevention activities and on related aspects of shelter operations. It should take about 30 minutes to answer all the questions.

Every shelter AIDS coordinator (or shelter director) in Massachusetts is being asked to complete the survey. And every response is vital to the success of the survey: The survey report must represent the full range of experiences.

You may be assured of complete confidentiality. No one outside of the university will have access to the questionnaire you return. (The ID number on the survey will permit us to check with nonrespondents to see if they need a replacement survey or other information.) All information presented in the report to Life Lines will be in aggregate form, with the exception of a list of the number, gender, and family status of each shelter's guests.

Please mail the survey back to us by Monday, June 4, and feel free to call if you have any questions.

Thank you for your assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Russell K. Schutt

Russell K. Schutt, Ph.D.
Project Director

Whoever is responsible for administering the survey to the group must be careful to minimize comments that might bias answers or that could vary between different groups in the same survey (Dillman, 2000:253–256). A standard introductory statement should be read to the group that expresses appreciation for their participation, describes the steps of the survey, and emphasizes (in classroom surveys) that the survey is not the same as a test. A cover letter like that used in mailed surveys also should be distributed with the questionnaires. To emphasize confidentiality, respondents should be given envelopes in which to seal their questionnaires after they are completed.

Another issue of special concern with group-administered surveys is the possibility that respondents will feel coerced to participate and, therefore, will be less likely to answer questions honestly. Also, because administering group surveys requires approval of the authorities—and this sponsorship is made quite obvious, because the survey is conducted on the organization's premises—respondents may infer that the researcher is in league with the sponsor. No complete solution to this problem exists, but it helps to make an introductory statement emphasizing the researcher's independence and giving participants a chance to ask questions about the survey. The sponsor should keep a low profile and allow the researcher both control over the data and autonomy in report writing.

Telephone Surveys

In a **phone survey**, interviewers question respondents over the phone and then record respondents' answers. Phone interviewing is traditionally a very popular method of conducting surveys in the United States because almost all families have phones. But two problems often threaten the validity of a phone survey: not reaching the proper sampling units (or "coverage error") and not getting enough successfully completed responses to make the results generalizable.

Phone survey: A survey in which interviewers question respondents over the phone and record their answers

Reaching Sample Units

The first big problem lies in the difficulty of actually contacting the sample units (typically households). Most telephone surveys use random digit dialing (RDD) at some point in the sampling process (Lavrakas, 1987) to contact a random sample of households. A machine calls random phone numbers within the designated exchanges, whether or not the numbers are published. RDD is a good way to "capture" unlisted numbers, whose owners are systematically different (often they are wealthier than the general population). When the machine reaches an inappropriate household (such as a business, in a survey of individuals), the phone number is simply replaced with another.

But the tremendous recent (since 2000) popularity of cellular, or mobile, telephones has made accurate coverage of random samples almost impossible, for several reasons (Tourangeau, 2004:781–792): (1) Cell phones are typically not listed in telephone directories, so they can't be included in prepared calling lists; (2) laws generally forbid the use of automated (RDD) dialers to contact cell phones; (3) close to 20% of the U.S. population now has only a cell phone (no landline) and therefore can't be reached by either RDD or many directory lists; and (4) for 18- to 24-year-olds, some 30% have cell phones only, and cell phone-only households are also more common among non–English speakers.

The net effect, then, of widespread cell phone usage is to underrepresent young people in particular from inclusion in most large telephone surveys, obviously damaging the results.

Maximizing Response to Phone Surveys

Even if an appropriate (for sampling) number is dialed, responses may not be completed. First, because people often are not home, multiple callbacks will be needed for many sample members. With large numbers of single-person households, dual-earner families, and out-of-home activities, survey research organizations have had to increase the usual number of phone contact attempts from just 4–8 to 20—a lot of attempts just to reach one person. Caller ID and call waiting allow potential respondents to avoid answering calls from strangers, including researchers. The growth of telemarketing has accustomed individuals nowadays to refuse calls from unknown individuals and organizations or to use their answering machines to screen calls (Dillman, 2000:8, 28). In the Muslim America study, many people were afraid to talk with the researchers or were actively hostile; after all, respondents don't really know who is calling and may have good reason to be suspicious. And since a huge number of cell phone users are children, and so legally unavailable for surveys, calls made to them are all wasted efforts for researchers.

Such problems mean that careful training and direction of interviewers is essential in phone surveys. The instructions shown in Exhibit 7.5 were developed to clarify procedures for asking and coding a series of questions in the phone interviews conducted for the youth and guns survey.

EXHIBIT 7.5 Sample Interviewer Instructions

Sample Interviewer Instructions, Youth and Guns Survey, 2000

22. (CONSTIT) To your knowledge, does the U.S. Constitution guarantee citizens the right to own firearms?
    1. Yes 2. No **(skip to 24)** 3. Not sure **(do not read)**

23. (CONLAW) Do you believe that laws regulating the sale and use of handguns violate the constitutional rights of gun owners?
    1. Yes 2. No 3. Not sure **(do not read)**

24. (PETITION) In some localities, high school students have joined campaigns to change the gun laws, and sometimes they have been successful. Earlier you said that you thought that the current gun control laws were (**if Q11 = 1, insert "not strict enough"; if Q11 = 2, insert "too strict"**). Suppose a friend who thinks like you do about this asked you to sign a petition calling for (**if Q11 = 1, insert "stronger gun control laws"; if Q11 = 2, insert "less restrictive gun control laws"**). On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being very unlikely and 5 being very likely, how likely is it that you would sign the petition?
    1. (Very unlikely)
    2.
    3.
    4.
    5. (Very likely)
    6. Not sure **(do not read)**

Phone surveying is the method of choice for relatively short surveys of the general population. Response rates in phone surveys traditionally have tended to be very high—often above 80%—because few individuals would hang up on a polite caller or refuse to stop answering questions (at least within the first 30 minutes or so). But the problems we have noted, especially those connected with cell phone usage, makes this method of surveying populations increasingly difficult.

In-Person Interviews

What is unique to the **in-person interview**, compared to the other survey designs, is the face-to-face social interaction between interviewer and respondent. If money is no object, in-person interviewing is often the best survey design.

> ***In-person interview:*** A survey in which an interviewer questions respondents face-to-face and records their answers

In-person interviewing has several advantages: Response rates are higher than with any other survey design; questionnaires can be much longer than with mailed or phone surveys; the questionnaire can be complex, with both open-ended and closed-ended questions and frequent branching patterns; the order in which questions are read and answered can be controlled by the interviewer; the physical and social circumstances of the interview can be monitored; and respondents' interpretations of questions can be probed and clarified. The interviewer, therefore, is well placed to gain a full understanding of what the respondent really wants to say.

However, researchers must be alert to some special hazards due to the presence of an interviewer. Ideally, every respondent should have the same interview experience—that is, each respondent should be asked the same questions in the same way by the same type of person, who reacts similarly to the answers. Suppose one interviewer is smiling and pleasant while another is gruff and rude; the two interviewers will likely elicit very different results in their surveys, if only in the length of responses. Careful training and supervision are essential (Groves, 1989:404–406).

Maximizing Response to Interviews

Several factors affect the response rate in interview studies. Contact rates tend to be lower in central cities, in part because of difficulties in finding people at home and gaining access to high-rise apartments, and, in part, because of interviewer reluctance to visit some areas at night, when people are more likely to be home (Fowler, 1988:45–60). Households with young children or elderly adults tend to be easier to contact, whereas single-person households are more difficult to reach (Groves & Couper, 1998:119–154).

Refusal rates vary with some respondent characteristics. People with less education participate somewhat less in surveys of political issues (perhaps because they are less aware of current political issues). Less education is also associated with higher rates of "Don't

know" responses (Groves, 1989). On the other hand, wealthy people often refuse to be surveyed about their income or buying habits, perhaps to avoid being plagued by sales calls. Such problems can be lessened with an advance letter introducing the survey project and by multiple contact attempts throughout the day and evening, but they cannot be entirely avoided (Fowler, 1988:52–53).

Electronic Surveys

The widespread use of personal computers and the growth of the Internet have created new possibilities for survey research. **Electronic surveys** can be prepared in two ways (Dillman, 2000:352–354). **E-mail surveys** can be sent as messages to respondent e-mail addresses. Respondents then mark their answers in the message and send them back to the researcher. This approach is easy for researchers to develop and for respondents to use. However, this approach is cumbersome for surveys that are more than four or five pages long. **Web surveys** are stored on a server that is controlled by the researcher; respondents are then asked to visit the Web site (often by just clicking an e-mailed link) and respond to the questionnaire by checking answers. Web surveys require more programming by the researcher, but a well-designed Web survey can tailor its questions to a given respondent and thus seem shorter, more interesting, and more attractive.

Electronic survey: A survey that is sent and answered by computer, either through e-mail or on the Web

E-mail survey: A survey that is sent and answered through e-mail

Web survey: A survey that is accessed and responded to on the World Wide Web

Web surveys are becoming a popular form of electronic survey in part because they are so flexible and inexpensive (see Exhibit 7.6). The questionnaire design can feature appealing graphic and typographic elements. By clicking on linked terms, respondents can view definitions of words or instructions for answering questions. Lengthy sets of response choices can be presented with pull-down menus. Pictures and audio segments can be added. Because answers are recorded directly in the researcher's database, data entry errors are virtually eliminated, and results can be reported quickly.

The most important drawback to either electronic survey approach is the large number of households that are not yet connected to the Internet—about 40% of U.S. households are not connected to the Internet. Households without Internet access also tend to be older and poorer than those that are connected (Tourangeau, 2004:792–793). Remember, regardless of your sampling work, there's zero chance of a non–computer user responding to an electronic survey. But there's another, almost opposite problem with Web surveys: Because they are so easy and cheap to set up, you can find hundreds of Web surveys on a wide range of topics and for many different purposes. Among Internet users, almost anyone can participate in many of these Web surveys. The large number of respondents such an

EXHIBIT 7.6 **Survey.Net—Year 2000 Presidential Election Survey**

Your source for information, opinions & demographics from the Net Community!

SURVEY.NET™

Year 2000 Presidential Election Survey

Take the year 2000 presidential election survey!

1. What is your age?
   No Answer
2. Your Sex:
   No Answer
3. Your highest level of education completed:
   No Answer
4. Your political affiliation:
   No Answer
5. Who did you vote for in 1996?
   No Answer
6. Even though not all of these candidates are necessarily running, if the presidential election were held today, who would you vote for?
   No Answer
7. Of the following TWO potential presidential candidates, who would you vote for?
   No Answer
8. Of the following presidential candidates, who would you vote for?
   No Answer
9. Do you consider yourself...
   No Answer

10. What political concepts do you agree with? *(check all that apply)*

- ☐ - We need less government regulation in general
- ☐ - We need more responsible government regulation
- ☐ - States should have more responsibility than the Federal Gov.

- ☐ - The government should NOT mandate moral standards
- ☐ - The government SHOULD mandate moral standards

- ☐ - Tax breaks are more important than reducing the deficit
- ☐ - Reducing the deficit is more important than tax breaks

- ☐ - Unions are destroying American productivity
- ☐ - Unions protect the worker

- ☐ - The economy is more important than the environment
- ☐ - The environment is more important than the economy

11. In your opinion, what is the worst problem with our society?
No Answer

12. Of those items listed, what should be our next President's highest priority?
No Answer

13. Without turning this into a partisan/rhetorical argument, who do you want to see for president in 2000 and why? (*Limit this to one or two sentences*)

Thanks very much for participating in the survey!

To submit your survey choices, select:
SUBMIT SURVEY

or Reset survey settings

You can view the latest survey results after you submit your answers.

We hope you will also participate in other surveys online as well. Please note that you should only complete each survey once.

uncontrolled method can generate should not cause you to forget the importance of a representative sample. Uncontrolled Web surveys are guaranteed to produce, instead, a very biased sample (Dillman, 2000:355).

When the population to be surveyed has a high rate of Internet use and access is controlled, however, the Web makes possible fast and effective surveys (Dillman, 2000:354–355). For example, Titus K. L. Schleyer and Jane L. Forrest (2000:420) achieved a 74% response rate in a survey of dental professionals who were already Internet users. Many corporations use Web surveys for gathering information and attitude profiles of their own employees and get response rates of 80% or more. A skilled Web programmer can generate a survey layout with many attractive features that make it more likely that respondents will give their answers—and have a clear understanding of the question (Smyth, Dillman, Christian, & Stern 2004:4–5). Under proper conditions, electronic surveys are an excellent tool.

A COMPARISON OF SURVEY DESIGNS

Which survey design should you use for a study? Let's compare the four major survey designs: mailed surveys, phone surveys, in-person surveys, and electronic surveys. (Group-administered surveys are similar in most respects to mailed surveys except that they require the unusual circumstance of having access to the sample in a group setting.) Exhibit 7.7 summarizes these strong and weak points.

The most important difference among these four methods is their varying response rates. Because of the low response rates of *mailed surveys*, they are weakest from a sampling standpoint. However, researchers with limited time, money, and staff may still prefer a mailed survey. Mailed surveys can be useful in asking sensitive questions (e.g., questions about marital difficulties or financial situation), because respondents won't be embarrassed by answering in front of an interviewer.

Contracting with an established survey research organization for a *phone survey* is often the best alternative to a mailed survey. The persistent follow-up attempts that are necessary to secure an adequate response rate are much easier over the phone than in person, although you must be careful about the cell phone sampling and response problem. A phone survey limits the length and complexity of the questionnaire but offers the possibility of very carefully monitoring interviewers (Fowler, 1988:61–73).

In-person surveys can be long and complex, and the interviewer can easily monitor the conditions (the room, noise and other distractions, etc.). Although interviewers may themselves distort results, either by changing the wording of questions or failing to record answers properly, this problem can be lessened by careful training and monitoring of interviewers and by tape-recording the answers.

The advantages and disadvantages of *electronic surveys* depend on the populations to be surveyed. Too many people do not have Internet connections for general use of Internet surveying. But when your entire sample has access and ability (e.g., college students, corporate employees), Web-based surveys can be very effective.

EXHIBIT 7.7 Advantages and Disadvantages of Four Survey Designs

Characteristics of Design	*Mail Survey*	*Phone Survey*	*In-Person Survey*	*Web Survey*
Representative sample				
Opportunity for inclusion is known				
For completely listed populations	High	High	High	Medium
For incompletely listed populations	Medium	Medium	High	Low
Selection within sampling units is controlled (e.g., specific family members must respond)	Medium	High	High	Low
Respondents are likely to be located				
If samples are heterogeneous	Medium	High	High	Low
If samples are homogeneous and specialized	High	High	High	High
Questionnaire construction and question design				
Allowable length of questionnaire	Medium	Medium	High	Medium
Ability to include				
Complex questions	Medium	Low	High	High
Open questions	Low	High	High	Medium
Screening questions	Low	High	High	High
Tedious, boring questions	Low	High	High	Low
Ability to control question sequence	Low	High	High	High
Ability to ensure questionnaire completion	Medium	High	High	Low
Distortion of answers				
Odds of avoiding social desirability bias	High	Medium	Low	High
Odds of avoiding interviewer distortion	High	Medium	Low	High
Odds of avoiding contamination by others	Medium	High	Medium	Medium
Administrative goals				
Odds of meeting personnel requirements	High	High	Low	Medium
Odds of implementing quickly	Low	High	Low	High
Odds of keeping costs low	High	Medium	Low	High

So overall, in-person interviews are the strongest design and are generally preferable when sufficient resources and a trained interview staff are available; telephone surveys have many of the advantages of in-person interviews at much less cost, but coverage response rates are an increasing problem. Any decision about the best survey design for a particular study must take into account the particular features and goals of the study.

ETHICAL ISSUES IN SURVEY RESEARCH

Survey research designs usually pose fewer ethical dilemmas than do experimental or field research designs. Potential respondents to a survey can easily refuse to participate, and a

cover letter or introductory statement that identifies the sponsors of and motivations for the survey gives them the information required to make this decision. Little is concealed from the respondents, and the methods of data collection are quite obvious. Only in group-administered survey designs might the respondents (such as students or employees) be, in effect, a captive audience, so they require special attention to ensure that participation is truly voluntary. (Those who do not wish to participate may be told they can just hand in a blank form.)

Sometimes, political or marketing surveys are used unscrupulously to sway opinion under the guise of asking for it. So-called "push polls" are sometimes employed in political campaigns to distort an opponent's image ("If you knew Congressman Jones was cheating on his wife, would you consider him fit for high office?"). Advertisers can use surveys that pretend to collect opinions or "register" a purchase for warranty purposes, but often they are really trying to collate information about where you live, your phone numbers, your buying habits, and the like.

Confidentiality is most often the primary focus of ethical concern in survey research. Many surveys include questions that might prove damaging to the subjects if their answers were disclosed. When a survey of employees asks, "Do you think management here, especially your boss, is doing a good job?" or when student course evaluations ask, "On a scale of 1 to 5, how fair would you say the professor is?" respondents may well hesitate; if the boss or professor saw the results, workers or students could be hurt.

To prevent any disclosure of such information, it is critical to preserve subject confidentiality. Only research personnel should have access to information that could be used to link respondents to their responses, and even that access should be limited to what is necessary for specific research purposes. Only numbers should be used to identify respondents on their questionnaires, and the researcher should keep the names that correspond to these numbers in a safe, private location, unavailable to staff and others who might come across them. Follow-up mailings or contact attempts that require linking the ID numbers with names and addresses should be carried out by trustworthy assistants under close supervision. If an electronic survey is used, encryption technology should be used to make information that is provided over the Internet secure from unauthorized people. Usually confidentiality can be protected readily; the key is to be aware of the issue. Don't allow bosses to collect workers' surveys or professors to pick up course evaluations. Be aware of your respondents' concerns and be even a little more careful than you need to be.

Few surveys can provide true **anonymity**, where no identifying information is ever recorded to link respondents with their responses. The main problem with anonymous surveys is that they preclude follow-up attempts to contact nonrespondents and they prevent panel designs, which measure change through repeated surveys of the same individuals. In-person surveys rarely can be anonymous, because an interviewer must, in almost all cases, know the name and address of the interviewee. However, phone surveys that are meant only to sample opinion at one point in time, as in political polls, can safely be completely anonymous. When no future follow-up is desired, group-administered surveys also can be

anonymous. To provide anonymity in a mail survey, the researcher should omit identifying codes from the questionnaire but may include a self-addressed, stamped postcard, so the respondent can notify the researcher that the questionnaire has been returned without creating any linkage to the questionnaire itself (Mangione, 1995:69).

> ***Anonymity:*** Provided by research in which no identifying information is recorded that could be used to link respondents to their responses

CONCLUSION

Survey research is an exceptionally efficient and productive method for investigating a wide array of social research questions. In addition to the potential benefits for social science, considerations of time and expense frequently make a survey the preferred data collection method. One or more of the five survey designs reviewed in this chapter can be applied to almost any research question. It is no wonder that surveys have become the most popular research method in sociology and that they frequently inform discussion and planning about important social and political questions. As use of the Internet increases, survey research should become even more efficient and popular.

The relative ease of conducting at least some types of survey research leads many people to imagine that no particular training or systematic procedures are required. Nothing could be further from the truth. But as a result of this widespread misconception, you will encounter a great many nearly worthless survey results. You must be prepared to examine carefully the procedures used in any survey before accepting its findings as credible. And if you decide to conduct a survey, you must be prepared to invest the time and effort required by proper procedures.

KEY TERMS

Anonymity
Cognitive interview
Context effects
Contingent question
Cover letter
Double-barreled question
Double negative
Electronic survey
E-mail survey
Fence-sitters
Filter question
Floaters
Group-administered survey
In-person interview
Interpretive questions
Interview schedule
Mailed (self-administered) survey
Omnibus survey
Phone survey
Questionnaire
Skip pattern
Survey research
Web survey

HIGHLIGHTS

- Surveys are the most popular form of social research because of their versatility, efficiency, and generalizability. Many survey datasets, like the General Social Survey, are available for social scientists to use in teaching and research.
- Omnibus surveys cover a range of topics of interest and generate data useful to multiple sponsors.
- Questions must be worded carefully to avoid confusing respondents, encouraging less-than-honest responses, or triggering biases. Inclusion of "Don't know" choices and neutral responses may help, but the presence of such options also affects the distribution of answers. Open-ended questions can be used to determine the meaning that respondents attach to their answers. Answers to any survey questions may be affected by the questions that precede them in a questionnaire or interview schedule.
- Questions can be tested and improved through review by experts, focus group discussions, cognitive interviews, and/or pilot testing. Every questionnaire and interview schedule should be pretested on a small sample that is like the sample to be surveyed.
- The cover letter for a mailed questionnaire should be credible, personalized, interesting, and responsible.
- Response rates in mailed surveys are typically well below 70%, unless multiple mailings are made to nonrespondents and the questionnaire and cover letter are attractive, interesting, and carefully planned. Response rates for group-administered surveys are usually much higher than for mailed surveys.
- Phone interviews using random digit dialing allow fast turnaround and efficient sampling. Multiple callbacks are often required, and the rate of nonresponse to phone interviews is rising. Phone interviews should be limited in length to about 30 to 45 minutes.
- In-person interviews have several advantages over other types of surveys: They allow longer and more complex interview schedules, monitoring of the conditions when the questions are answered, probing for respondents' understanding of the questions, and high response rates. However, the interviewer must balance the need to establish rapport with the respondent with the need to adhere to a standardized format.
- Electronic surveys may be e-mailed or posted on the Web. Interactive voice response systems using the telephone are another option. At this time, use of the Internet is not sufficiently widespread to allow e-mail or Web surveys of the general population, but these approaches can be fast and efficient for populations with high rates of computer use.
- The decision to use a particular survey design must take into account the unique features and goals of the study. In general, in-person interviews are the strongest but most expensive survey design.
- Most survey research poses few ethical problems because respondents can decline to participate—an option that should be stated clearly in the cover letter or introductory statement. Special care must be taken when questionnaires are administered in group settings (to "captive audiences") and when sensitive personal questions are to be asked; subject confidentiality should always be preserved.

STUDENT STUDY SITE

To assist you in completing the Web Exercises, please access the Study Site at **http://www.pineforge.com/mssw3**, where you'll find the Web Exercises with accompanying links. You'll find other useful study materials like self-quizzes and e-flashcards for each chapter, along with a group of carefully selected articles from research journals that illustrate the major concepts and techniques presented in the book.

EXERCISES

Discussing Research

1. Response rates to phone surveys are declining, even as phone usage increases. Part of the problem is that lists of cell phone numbers are not available and wireless service providers do not allow outside access to their networks. Cell phone users may also have to pay for incoming calls. Do you think regulations should be passed to increase the ability of survey researchers to include cell phones in their random digit dialing surveys? How would you feel about receiving survey calls on your cell phone? What problems might result from "improving" phone survey capabilities in this way?

2. In-person interviews have for many years been the "gold standard" in survey research, because the presence of an interviewer increases the response rate, allows better rapport with the interviewee, facilitates clarification of questions and instructions, and provides feedback about the interviewee's situation. However, researchers who design in-person interviewing projects are now making increasing use of technology to ensure consistent questioning of respondents and to provide greater privacy while answering questions. But having a respondent answer questions on a laptop while the interviewer waits is a very different social process than asking the questions verbally. Which approach would you favor in survey research? What tradeoffs can you suggest there might be in terms of quality of information collected, rapport building, and interviewee satisfaction?

Finding Research

1. What resources are available for survey researchers? This question can be answered in part through careful inspection of a Web site maintained by the Survey Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois at Chicago: http://www.srl.uic.edu/srllink/srllink.htm#Organizations. Spend some time reviewing these resources and write a brief summary of them.

2. Go to the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) site and browse the work it does and the resources it offers in survey design: http://www.rti.org/page.cfm/Capabilities/. What steps in the survey process can be improved through use of these resources? Give specific examples.

Critiquing Research

1. Read one of the original articles that reported one of the surveys described in this chapter. Critique the article using the questions presented in Exhibit 12.2 as your guide but focus particular attention on sampling, measurement, and survey design.

2. Each of the following questions was used in a survey that we received at some time in the past. Evaluate each question and its response choices using the guidelines for question writing presented in this chapter. What errors do you find? Try to rewrite each question to avoid such errors and improve question wording.

   a. The first question in an *Info World* (computer publication) "product evaluation survey":

   How interested are you in PostScript Level 2 printers?

   ____ Very ____ Somewhat ____ Not at all

   b. From the Greenpeace National Marine Mammal Survey:

   Do you support Greenpeace's nonviolent direct action to intercept whaling ships, tuna fleets and other commercial fishermen in order to stop their wanton destruction of thousands of magnificent marine mammals?

   ____ Yes ____ No ____ Undecided

   c. From a U.S. Department of Education survey of college faculty:

   How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each of the following aspects of your instructional duties at this institution?

	Very dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied
a. The authority I have to make decisions about what courses I teach.....	1	2	3	4
b. Time available for working with students as advisor, mentor..	1	2	3	4

   d. From a survey about affordable housing in a Massachusetts community:

   Higher than single-family density is acceptable in order to make housing affordable.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

e. From a survey of faculty experience with ethical problems in research:

Are you reasonably familiar with the codes of ethics of any of the following professional associations?

	Very Familiar	Familiar	Not too Familiar
American Sociological Association	1	2	0
Society for the Study of Social Problems	1	2	0
American Society of Criminology	1	2	0

If you are familiar with any of the above codes of ethics, to what extent do you agree with them?

Strongly Agree_____ Agree_____ No Opinion_____ Disagree_____ Disagree Strongly_____

Some researchers have avoided using *professional code of ethics* as a guide for the following reasons. Which responses, if any, best describe your reasons for not using all or any of the parts of the codes?

	Yes	No
1. Vagueness	1	0
2. Political pressures	1	0
3. Codes protect only individuals, not groups	1	0

f. From a survey of faculty perceptions:

Of the students you have observed while teaching college courses, please indicate the percentage who significantly improved their performance in the following areas:

Reading ____%

Organization ____%

Abstraction ____%

g. From a University of Massachusetts, Boston student survey:

A person has a responsibility to stop a friend or relative from driving when drunk.

Strongly Agree _____ Agree _____ Disagree _____ Strongly Disagree _____

Even if I wanted to, I would probably not be able to stop most people from driving drunk.

Strongly Agree _____ Agree _____ Disagree _____ Strongly Disagree _____

3. We received in a university mailbox some years ago a two-page questionnaire that began with the following "cover letter" at the top of the first page:

Faculty Questionnaire

This survey seeks information on faculty perception of the learning process and student performance in their undergraduate careers. Surveys have been distributed in nine universities in the Northeast, through random deposit in mailboxes of selected departments. This survey is being conducted by graduate students affiliated with the School of Education and the Sociology Department. We greatly appreciate your time and effort in helping us with our study.

Critique this cover letter and then draft a more persuasive one.

4. Go to the Centre for Applied Social Surveys Question Bank at http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk. Click on the link for one of the listed surveys. Review 10 questions used in the survey and critique them in terms of the principles for question writing that you have learned. Do you find any question features that might be attributed to the use of British English?

Doing Research

1. Write 10 questions for a one-page questionnaire that concerns your proposed research question. Your questions should operationalize at least three of the variables on which you have focused, including at least one independent and one dependent variable. (You may have multiple questions to measure some variables.) Make all but one of your questions closed-ended. If you completed the "research proposal" exercises in Chapter 2, "Doing Research," you can select your questions from the ones you developed for those exercises.
2. Conduct a preliminary pretest of the questionnaire by conducting cognitive interviews with two students or other persons like those to whom the survey is directed. Follow up the closed-ended questions with open-ended probes that ask the respondents what they meant by each response or what came to mind when they were asked each question. Take account of the feedback you receive when you revise your questions.
3. Polish up the organization and layout of the questionnaire, following the guidelines in this chapter. Prepare a rationale for the order of questions in your questionnaire. Write a cover letter directed to the appropriate population that contains appropriate statements about research ethics (human subject issues).

Ethics Questions

1. Group-administered surveys are easier to conduct than other types of surveys, but they always raise an ethical dilemma. If a teacher allows a social research survey to be distributed in his or her class, or if an employer allows employees to complete a survey on company time, is the survey truly voluntary? Is it sufficient to read a statement to the group stating that their participation is entirely up to them? How would you react to a survey in your class? What general guidelines should be followed in such situations?
2. Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) sampled adults with random digit dialing to study violent victimization from a nationally representative sample of adults. What ethical dilemmas do you see in reporting victimizations that are identified in a survey? What about when the survey respondents are under the age of 18? What about children under the age of 12?