

Asking Questions

Soc 357
Fall 2006

Methods of research

- Surveys
- Interviews

Gathering Data

	Survey	Interview
Sample type	Large, probability	Small N, probability or not
Question format	Mostly Closed-ended questions, multiple items, <i>Structured</i>	Mostly Open-ended questions, Probes for clarification, <i>Semi- or Un-structured</i>
Interaction	Strict protocol	Looser, develop rapport

Open-ended & Closed-ended Questions

- **Open-ended:** no limits on answers
- **Closed-ended:** a finite set of answers to choose from
 - E.g. "What did you like most about the University of Wisconsin-Madison?" **VS.** "Which of the following things did you like most about UW–Madison: the social life, the academic program, the athletics program, the location, the political orientation?"

Types of Questions on Surveys

- Social background information
- Reports of past behavior
- Attitudes, beliefs, values
- Behavior intentions
- Sensitive questions

Types of Questions in Interviews

- Anything, but especially questions that elicit descriptions, attitudes, stories – in other words, questions that try to get the respondent to describe things in his or her own words, rather than choosing from a set of answers given by the researcher.

Conducting Surveys

- Surveys follow a strict protocol to minimize their impact on the respondent
 - Reading questions exactly as written
 - Use pre-designated probes
 - Record answers to open-ended questions without comment
 - Do not give personal information, express opinions, or give feedback
- E.g. Lavin & Maynard, "Laughter in Survey Interviews"

Conducting Interviews

- Interviewers maintain openness, willingness to listen, non-judgemental attitude, put ego aside.
- Establish a communicative setting by:
 - Asking non-threatening questions, especially at the beginning
 - Displaying recognition & empathy
 - Controlling non-verbal behavior: eye contact, fidgeting, body position, facial expression, tone of voice, distracting mannerisms

Analysis of Data

	Survey	Interviews
Preparation	Coding answers <i>numerically</i>	Coding answers <i>thematically</i>
Results	Description AND Explanation	Description AND Theory

Survey Strengths & Weaknesses

- Strengths:
 - Broader range of topics than experiments
 - Efficient way to gather a lot of data
 - Generalizeable if using probability sample
- Weaknesses:
 - Can't isolate causal variables; theoretical association between variables is always imputed by the researcher
 - Bad question wording undermines reliability & validity of questions: **pretesting is key!**

Interview Strengths & Weaknesses

- Strengths:
 - Data is rich, helps us understand "why" we see associations
 - You can ask for clarification, connections
 - Less costly than surveys
- Weaknesses:
 - Results not generalizable
 - Results aren't compact

Comparing Ransford AND Ewick and Silbey

- For each article, what were the
 - Units of analysis
 - Sample
 - Variables
 - Operationalization of variables
 - Results
 - Strengths & weaknesses?

Interaction Effects

- When two variables together affect a dependent variable differently than either one of them would on its own
 - Eg. Alcohol & sleeping pills: either one will make you sleepy, but taken together, they *interact* and knock you out.
 - Eg. Ransford's study: Powerlessness & Dissatisfaction – taken together, they increase the likelihood of violence by more than if you added up the individual effects of each

Spuriousness

- Can some other variable account for the statistical association you see?
- To check, we “hold constant” other possible explanatory variables – we look within each category of the extra variable to see if the association we originally observed still holds
 - E.g. Smoking & Lung cancer & Social class
 - Ransford held Neighborhood & Education constant

Ransford Vs. Ewick & Silbey

- What background assumptions is each article making?
- What do we learn about the phenomenon of resistance from each article?
- Which finding do you think is more interesting? Why?
