

TABLE 11.1 ACCESS AND POWER

Using power	Abusing power
➤ Using official channels and protocols	➤ Avoiding and skirting around official channels and protocols
➤ Establishing points of contact	➤ Going around or above the appropriate person's head
➤ Using gatekeepers and insiders	➤ Asking gatekeepers and insiders to act unethically or to go behind management's back
➤ Building rapport	➤ Ingratiate yourself to the point of becoming sycophantic
➤ Leaving doors open	➤ Becoming a nuisance
➤ Offering something back	➤ Making promises you cannot or do not intend to keep

researched abused at any stage in the research process. As articulated in Table 11.1, if the subtleties of gaining access are not managed appropriately, it can be easy to abuse relationships and take advantage of individuals.

SURVEYING

First, a point of clarification ... in its broadest sense, *to survey* (v) means 'to look at or examine', while *a survey* (n) means 'an observation or an overview'. Now some research methods texts use these definitions and group a number of approaches/methods under the survey heading. However, when I use the word 'survey', both as a noun and a verb, I am using more specific definitions that relate to a particular social science method.

Survey (n): Information gathered by asking a range of individuals the same questions related to their characteristics, attributes, how they live, or their opinions.

Survey (v): The process of collecting such information.

Knowing what to expect

Now students often tell me they've decided to conduct a survey; after all, they've heard they are a relatively simple, straightforward, and cost-effective means of gathering credible data. Well I hate to break it to them, but this is a long way from the truth. Yes, a good survey does have the potential to:

- reach a large number of respondents
- represent an even larger population
- generate standardized, quantifiable, empirical data

- be confidential and anonymous and
- generate qualitative data through the use of open-ended questions

But there seems to be a belief out there that just about anyone can construct a survey instrument, and conduct a survey. You just need to know who you want to target; what you want to ask; and have some modicum of common sense about you. But I'll tell you what ... social science surveying really needs to be considered a specialist activity. Constructing and administering a survey that can generate credible and generalizable data is a truly difficult task. There are a whole lot of really crappy surveys out there that aren't worth the paper they're printed on, yet the data they generate is often reported as truth and used in all kinds of decision-making processes.

If it is your intention to gather data using a survey and a survey instrument, you will need to have good support. In addition to getting a handle on the information presented here, it's worth talking to your supervisor and working through some of the recommended readings at the end of the chapter. Another option is to look into survey software. 'Sphinx', accessible at www.scoalri.com, is a program designed to help you with all main aspects of surveying, including questionnaire construction and data analysis.

Basic survey types

A survey is a survey. Well not quite. There are actually a few distinct types of survey, each suited to a different purpose. But if you are familiar with the various types, and know what you want to know (thereby knowing what you want your survey to do), choosing appropriate types will be a relatively easy task.

Surveys can describe and/or explain:

Descriptive surveys: These surveys pretty much do what they say – they describe. This might involve basic demographic information like age, socio-economic status, and gender; or more personal information such as voting patterns, how often respondents have sex, or how frequently they spank their children. They can also gather attitudinal information such as attitudes towards war, euthanasia, or abortion. The goal is to get a snapshot – to show or to describe your 'respondents' – and, if a representative sample is used, to be able to generalize that description to a larger population.

Explanatory surveys: These surveys go beyond description (although they do gather descriptive data) and attempt to establish why things might be the way they are. For example, not only would an explanatory survey want to describe a population's attitude towards abortion, but it would also seek to establish what might shape and form those attitudes, i.e. the effect of family values or personal experience. An explanatory survey attempts to build more complex understandings and goes beyond description, or even correlation, in an attempt to determine cause and effect.

Surveys might target full populations or samples of populations:

Census: This is a survey that does not rely on a sample. A census surveys every single person in a defined or target population.

Cross-sectional surveys: This type of survey uses a sample or cross-section of respondents selected to represent a target population. The goal is to be able to generalize the findings of the sample to the population with a high degree of confidence.

Survey can also be longitudinal and explore changing times or changing people:

Trend surveys: A trend survey asks similar groups of respondents, or the same cross-section, the same questions at two or more points in time. For example, conducting three surveys over a 20-year period (1984, 1994, 2004) that asks teenagers about perceived personal and professional opportunities. This allows you to assess whether the attitudes of teenagers have changed over the past two decades – in other words, are teenagers the same now as they were in the 1980s.

Panel study: A panel study involves asking the same (not similar) sample of respondents the same questions at two or more points in time. Using the example above, if you were to survey 18 year-olds in 1984, then you would survey these same individuals in 1994 when they were 28, and again in 2004 when they were 38. You would then be able to assess whether there was a shift in respondents' attitudes as they get older.

Finally, surveys can be administered in a number of ways:

Face-to-face surveys: This mode of surveying allows surveyors the opportunity to establish rapport, build trust, motivate respondents, clarify questions, read non-verbal cues, and probe appropriately. The response rate also tends to be good. However, face-to-face surveying is often a lengthy and expensive process, does not assure anonymity or even confidentiality, requires surveyor training, and may be affected by interviewer bias.

Telephone surveys: Telephone surveys are relatively inexpensive and take minimal time, allow for coverage of a wide geographic area, and offer some assurance of anonymity and confidentiality. On the down side, the response rate, while better than self-administered surveys, is still lower than face-to-face surveys; it's easy to catch people at a bad time; respondents can hang up on you if they have had enough; and you are limited to surveying only those with a telephone.

Self-administered surveys: These surveys can offer anonymity and therefore confidentiality. They also allow coverage of a wide geographic area, and give respondents the opportunity to complete questionnaires in their own time. Response rates, however, can be really low (unless you can distribute your survey

through an organization that lets respondents fill out the surveys as part of the school/or work day). And of course respondents cannot seek clarification. Self-administered surveys are often mailed, but can also be sent and received electronically. This can potentially save you thousands, but you are limited to surveying those with e-mail addresses or populations likely to be online.

The survey process

Conducting a 'good' survey is a process that involves a whole lot of steps. Surveys require you to: plan the approach, process, tools, and all the contingencies; construct the survey instrument; run a trial or pilot; redevelop as appropriate; send out the survey; manage the responses; and finally analyze the data. Box 11.2 outlines the 25+ steps (some you will need to do more than once) involved in surveying. You may find this box helpful as both a guide and a checklist.

Box 11.2 Steps (and there are a lot) for Conducting a 'Good' Survey

PLAN

1. Realistically consider issues of sampling, distribution, reminders, response rates, and data management so that you are relatively sure a survey/questionnaire will work.
2. Develop a plan you can implement if response rates are low.
3. Consider what aspects of your research question(s) are likely to be answered through a questionnaire.
4. List, group, and categorize these 'aspects'.
5. Explore whether there might be existing questionnaires or sets of questions that address these 'aspects' that may be appropriate.

CONSTRUCT

6. If relevant questionnaires or sets of questions exist – adopt, adapt, and modify.
7. If your questionnaire requires the construction of any new questions, have a shot at drafting them.
8. Decide on the response categories for each question, considering both the effect of response categories on responses themselves and how various types of response category translate to different data types that demand quite distinct statistical treatment.
9. Carefully read each question and response choices, and think about whether your questions might be considered ambiguous, leading, confronting, offensive, based on unwarranted assumptions, double-barrelled, or pretentious.
10. Rewrite the questions in relation to the considerations above and run them past a few peers/supervisors for their assessment. Repeat this step as many times as necessary to get each question as right as possible.

11. Attempt to put your questions in an order that will be logical and ease respondents into your survey.
12. Write instructions for your respondents and ask your peers/supervisor whether they seem clear and unambiguous. Rewrite as necessary.
13. Construct a clear, logical, professional, and aesthetically pleasing layout and design.
14. Write a cover letter.

PILOT

15. Pilot your questionnaire with a few people who are similar to those in your sample.
16. Get feedback from the pilot group in relation to the questions themselves (see step 9); the overall layout and design; the effectiveness of the cover letter; the usefulness of the instructions; and the length of time it took to complete the questionnaire.
17. Attempt to create variables, code the pilot responses, and then plug it into a statistical program (or qualitative data analysis program) to see if you are likely to encounter any issues when you input your main data.

REDEVELOP

18. Make modifications based on both the feedback of the pilot group and the quality of the data generated.
19. If modifications are substantial, start again from step 15.
20. Get ethical clearance for the final version of your questionnaire.

EXECUTE

21. Distribute questionnaires; be sure to include instructions for return (address and return date) and possibly a self-addressed stamped envelope.
22. Send out a reminder letter if response rates are low.
23. Put low response rate plan (see step 1) into action if not enough data has been gathered by your deadline.
24. Record and manage responses as they are received.

ANALYZE DATA

25. Turn to Chapter 12 to work through management and analysis of the data!

The survey instrument

When it comes to conducting a survey, what students struggle with most is constructing the actual survey instrument. From drafting the questions through to layout and design, students are quite surprised at how much thought and work goes into the development of an instrument capable of generating credible data.

Formulating questions

The first step in writing your questions is knowing what you want to ask. By the time you are ready to construct your survey instrument you should know what aspects of your research questions can be answered by your respondents. The second step is to attempt an initial drafting of questions related to each of these aspects.

Now there are about 762 ways to ask the same question, and each of these ways has potential to generate quite different data, so knowing how to best draft your questions can be a real challenge. While there are volumes written on crafting survey questionnaires, a few basic rules can be applied that can help you avoid the pitfalls of leading, offending, or confusing your respondents. Using a number of examples, Box 11.3 covers these basic rules.

Box 11.3 Questions to Avoid

Writing good questions is about clarity and specificity, but there are plenty of ways to make sure this doesn't happen. It is easy to construct questions that are:

POORLY WORDED

- **Complex terms and language** – big words can offend and confuse. If they're not necessary, why use them? Compare the two following agree/disagree statements: '*Polysyllabic linguistic terminology can act to obscure connotations*' vs '*Big words can be confusing*'.
- **Ambiguous questions** – It's very easy to write ambiguous questions because frames of reference can be highly divergent. For example, consider the questions: '*How big is your family?*' or '*Do you use drugs?*' Families can be nuclear or extended, or for children of separated parents, may include two households. Similarly, 'drugs' can be an ambiguous term. Some respondents will only consider illegal drugs, while others may include prescription drugs. And of course, it would be impossible to know whether alcohol or cigarettes were also considered.
- **Double negatives** – a significant proportion of respondents get confused when faced with double negatives. Consider the following agree/disagree statement: '*You are not satisfied with your job*'. To state that you are satisfied in your job means that you need to choose disagree, which can be quite confusing.
- **Double-barrelled questions** – this is when you ask for only one response to a question with more than one issue. For example, take the question: '*Do you consider the President to be an honest and effective leader?*' Respondents may think yes, effective – but definitely not honest.

BIASED, LEADING OR LOADED

- **'Ring true' statements** – these are statements that are easy to agree with simply because of their 'ring true tone'. A couple of examples might be 'You really can't rely on people these days' or 'Times may be tough, but there are generally people around you can count on'. Both of these are likely to get a high percentage of agree responses.
- **Hard to disagree with statements** – these are statements where your respondent is likely to think 'yes that's true, but...'. They are not, however, given a chance to elaborate and are forced to either agree or disagree. For example, 'The elderly are often a burden to society'.
- **Leading questions** – leading respondents towards a particular response can be a simple task (one often done for political purposes). Consider how the wording of the following questions on abortion might affect responses: 'Do mothers have the right to murder an unborn child?' vs 'Do women have the right to make choices about their own bodies?'

PROBLEMATIC FOR THE RESPONDENT

- **Recall dependent questions** – these are questions that rely on memory. For example, 'How many jobs have you held?' Without boundaries such as an occupational field or timeframe, this question can be easy to answer 'incorrectly'.
- **Offensive questions** – if respondents take offence to a question or a series of questions, not only are they likely to skip those items, they may just throw out the entire survey. Offensive questions can range from 'What did you do to make your husband leave you?' to 'How old are you?'
- **Questions with assumed knowledge** – be careful not to assume your respondents know about, or are familiar with, the same things as yourself. For example, the agree/disagree statement 'Postmodern art is exciting and dynamic', could easily meet with a, 'What the #@% is postmodern art?' response.
- **Questions with unwarranted assumptions** – respondents are likely to be at a loss when it comes to answering a question that contains an assumption they do not agree with. For example, the question 'What aspect of this course did you enjoy most?' assumes that the respondent enjoyed something.
- **Questions with socially desirable responses** – this is more likely to be an issue in face-to-face surveying where the respondents may not want to 'look bad' to the survey administrator. For example, respondents may be uncomfortable disagreeing with the statement 'I am for affirmative action because they don't want to come across as a racist.'

Response categories

Determining response categories is as crucial to generating credible data as is setting the questions themselves. First, response categories influence the answers that are given. For example, if you add an 'I'm not sure' option to a controversial yes/no question, it will have a definite impact on your findings. Second, different types of

response category generate various data types that demand quite distinct statistical treatment. In fact, understanding the various data types (nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio – discussed in Chapter 12), definitely facilitates the process of survey construction, particularly response category determination. Most students, however, don't really get their heads around variable types and the significance they have for survey instrument construction until they begin the process of analyzing their data.

This makes conducting your first survey really tricky. Many lecturers find that 'doing' is the best way of learning, and that struggling with analysis in a first survey is the best way to learn what to do when it comes to constructing your next. Now I happen to agree, but if your first survey 'needs to count' and credible data is a high priority, you'll need to: (1) turn to Chapter 12 to familiarize yourself with the basics of data management and analysis; and (2) become familiar with various response options before finalizing your questions (see below).

Survey questions can either be open or closed:

Open questions: These questions ask respondents to construct answers using their own words. Respondents can offer any information/express any opinion they wish, although the amount of space provided for an answer will generally limit the response. Open questions can generate rich and candid data, but it can be data that is difficult to code and analyze.

Closed questions: These questions force respondents to choose from a range of predetermined responses and are generally easy to code and statistically analyze. As shown in Box 11.4, closed questions come in many forms, each associated with particular issues.

Box 11.4 Common Response Categories for Closed Questions**YES/NO – AGREE/DISAGREE**

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Do you drink alcohol? | Yes/No |
| 2. Is drinking bad for your health? | Agree/Disagree |

While it can be easy to work with 'binomial' data (or data with only two potential responses), you need to consider whether respondents will be comfortable with only two choices. For example, in Q1, a respondent might be thinking 'Not really (I only drink when I go out, which is hardly ever)', or for Q2, 'It depends on how much you're talking about?' A potential strategy is to offer a *don't know/no opinion* option, but this allows for a lot of 'fence sitting'.

FILL IN THE BLANK

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------|
| 3. How much do you weigh? | _____ |
|---------------------------|-------|

Even a simple question like this (assuming your respondents know the answer and are willing to tell you) can lead to messy data. Will respondents write 90 kgs, 198 lbs, or 14 stone? Of course you can convert these answers to one system, but that isn't going to be possible if they just put 90.

CHOOSING FROM A LIST

4. *What would you drink most often?*

Beer Wine Spirits Mixed drinks Cocktails

There is an assumption here that there will not be any 'ties'; you need to consider what you will do if more than one option is circled. You also need to make sure all options are covered. A potential strategy is to offer an 'other' or 'other: _____' option.

ORDERING OPTIONS

5. *Please place the following drinks in order of preference*

Beer Wine Spirits Mixed drinks Cocktails

These questions have been found to be quite difficult for respondents, particularly if lists are long. It is worth remembering that if respondents get frustrated trying to answer your question, they are likely to leave the question blank, leave it half finished, or just write anything at all.

LIKERT TYPE SCALING:

6. *It is normal for teenagers to binge drink*

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Disagree Unsure Agree Strongly agree

Likert scales offer a range of responses generally ranging from something like 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. In Likert scaling you need to consider: the number of points you will use; whether you will force a side; and whether you think respondents will 'get on a roll' and keep circling a particular number.

Information and instruction

Providing clear background information and lucid instructions is an essential part of good survey instrument construction.

- *Offering information* – surveys need to include some background information that identifies the sponsor/university; clarifies the survey's purpose; assures anonymity/confidentiality; provides return information, including deadlines and return address; and offers thanks for time/assistance. This information can be included at the start of the survey or as a cover letter or e-mail.

- *Providing instruction* – what might be self-evident to you, may not be so obvious to your respondents. Your instructions should introduce each section of the survey instrument; give clear and specific instructions for each question type; provide examples; and be easy to distinguish from the actual survey questions – in fact it's a good idea to use a different font. It may take a couple of drafts to get your instructions as clear and helpful as possible, and it's advisable to ask your peers/supervisor if your instructions do the job. However, the real test will come when you pilot the instrument, review the data, and seek feedback from your pilot participants.

Organization and length

Once the elements of your survey are complete, you need to think about putting it together in a logical order that covers it all without being overly lengthy.

- *Length* – instruments considered too long can be abandoned, returned incomplete, or filled in at random. I once filled in a survey for a gourmet chicken shop in order to get a free piece of chicken (well I was a poor student at the time). This thing turned out to be, no lie, nine pages long. How many finger-licking chicken questions can you answer? For me it turned out to be all of them (I wasn't leaving without my Kiev), but I think I was supposed to actually read the questions before ticking the boxes!
- *Organization* – you are likely to find contradictory advice on whether to start or end with demographics, and where to place your most important questions. A lot of this depends on the nature of both your questions and your respondents; and you may want to pilot two different versions of your questionnaire if you are unsure how to lay it all out. One tried and true piece of advice, however, is that you don't want to start your survey with any questions that might be considered threatening. It is important to ease your respondents into your survey and save sensitive question for near the end.

Layout and design

You'd think that all of the intense intellectual work that has gone into writing clear and unambiguous questions with appropriate, well thought out response categories that are accompanied by clear instruction and organized into a sensitive, logical, and manageable form would be enough to ensure a 'good' survey. Not quite. Aesthetics counts!

If your survey looks unprofessional (for example, poor photocopies, faint printing, messy and uninteresting layout etc.), two things can happen. First, respondents will be less likely to complete a survey that is unprofessional and lacking an aesthetically pleasing layout and design. Second, the potential for mistakes increases dramatically if surveys are cluttered, cramped, or messy.

INTERVIEWING

I'm going to start my discussion of interviewing with another point of clarification. When I talk about interviewing, I am referring to a process with the following definition: