

QUESTION

3

What Are the Benefits of Doing a Survey?

Surveys have several great properties that make them ideal to answer almost any type of research question. Surveys are versatile, cost effective, and generalizable.

Surveys are versatile in that any research topic or question can be made to work well as a survey. Many disciplines in the social sciences use survey data, such as sociology, political science, psychology, education, health sciences, social work, and many more. In fact, about a third of all academic publications use survey data, attesting to its popularity.

There are repositories of publically available survey data that anyone can use (most is available at www.ICPSR.umich.edu). While some questions may not fit your concepts as well as you would like, you can still answer a research question easily and inexpensively by using publically available survey data. Many social scientists make a whole career out of analyzing secondary use, publically available survey data and never create their own surveys.

Surveys are efficient in terms of time and resources because, relative to the number of questions that can be asked and the number of people that can be surveyed, the value of the results far outweighs the costs of administration. To be clear, survey research is not inexpensive in terms of either money or time commitment. Researchers can spend enormous amounts of time planning a study, implementing a study, cleaning and analyzing the data, and finally in writing up the results. However, surveys, once designed, are relatively inexpensive. That is, adding an additional question or additional participant does not increase the cost very much.

The last major strength or benefit of surveys is generalizability, which means that the information found in the survey is representative or reflective of the entire population being studied—not just the sample collected. Not all surveys take advantage of this strength of the survey method, meaning that simply doing a survey does not mean that the results are generalizable. In order for us to be able to generalize, we must rigorously follow the proper sampling techniques (coming in Part 4).

More questions? See questions 1, 2, and 4.