

Chapter 24

Surveying Sensitive Topics

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Many issues that are interesting for social and behavioral researchers are of a sensitive nature. These sensitive issues are often related to important problems, like the spread of sexually transmittable diseases, the growing numbers of young drugs-users, the increase in violent crime, and the growing lack of integrity and counterproductive behavior in organizations. Therefore an accurate measurement of the prevalence of these issues and their predictors is very important for theory building as well as for policy making. In view of the fact that sensitive information is not always available through secondary data sources, it has to be collected from individuals by means of surveys or face-to-face interviews. Studying sensitive topics with surveys is like doing a regular survey but with an added dimension. Everything that holds at every step for the regular survey process also holds for sensitive surveys. However, researchers dealing with sensitive topics should realize the special problems that accompany such topics, such as,

- Sampling problems due to hard-to-contact or unlisted populations
- Nonresponse problems because the topic is harmful and threatening to the respondent, or the respondent's social group, and thus respondents will not cooperate or refuse to answer the sensitive questions.
- Problems with the quality of the answers due to socially desirable answering and memory problems.

Ready-to-go solutions are seldom available for the construction of a sensitive survey. Sampling problems with hard-to-contact groups can be solved using different kinds of snowball designs. Nonresponse problems can be solved using different response modes and special techniques that objectively guarantee the respondent's privacy, like the randomized response technique and the unmatched count technique. Careful development of the questions can prevent socially desirable responses. All these techniques are explained in this chapter.

Doing a sensitive survey is not easy; it is a challenge even for experienced survey researchers. Nevertheless obtaining reliable and valid data of high quality on sensitive topics is possible.

GLOSSARY OF KEY CONCEPTS

Evasive answer bias (or socially desirable responding). The tendency of a respondent to respond in a socially acceptable way in order to obtain social approval or to avoid disgrace and embarrassment.

Network scale-up. The network scale-up method is designed to obtain estimates of the size of hidden populations. These estimates are computed using the respondent's knowledge of the appearance of certain behavior in his personal social network. A random sample of respondents is collected. Every respondent receives two questions. The first question consists of 8–15 names (or professions, or traits), with known distribution in the population. The size of his or her personal network is estimated on the basis of the number of people with these names (professions) recalled by the respondent. The second question concerns the number of people affected by the sensitive issue. Using both numbers, the number of offenders in the population can be estimated.

Randomized response technique. The randomized response technique was originally introduced by Warner (1965) to study sensitive topics. The rationale behind all randomized response designs is that the respondent's privacy is absolutely guaranteed by introducing an element of chance into the data. This is thought to enhance respondent's cooperation and honest reporting of sensitive information.

Sensitive questions. Questions are considered sensitive when they are about private, stressful or sacred issues, and when answering them tends to generate emotional responses, or potential fear of stigmatization on the part of the person or his/her social group.

Snowball designs. A snowball design is a so-called link-tracing design; social links are followed from one respondent to another to obtain a sample, by asking a respondent to name one or more people who could be eligible respondents. These designs are developed to gain access to hidden and hard-to-find human populations.

Unmatched count technique. A research method developed by Dalton and coworkers (1994) to ensure the anonymity of respondents. Respondents are randomly assigned to two groups. The first group receives blocks of 5 behavioral statements, the second group receives the same block of statements + 1: the sensitive one. All respondents are asked to indicate how many statements apply to him or her. The difference in mean numbers of behavioral statements between both groups is an indicator for the base-rate of individuals involved in the sensitive behavior.

Vignette (or scenario design). A vignette is a concrete and detailed description of a situation that should contain all the factors that are thought to be important situational motivators. In a survey, vignettes are followed by a set of questions about the situation they have presented. Vignettes can be used to find out about the respondent's, behavior, attitudes, norms and beliefs.