

BOOK REVIEW

G. Hoinville, R. Jowell and Associates, *Survey Research Practice*, Heinemann, London, 1978, £ 6.50 card, £ 2.50 paper.

Survey research method is employed in about 60% of all funded social research in Britain and accounts for about 75% of the total cost of such research. If surveys undertaken by local government and other organisations for administrative or policy-making purposes are included, these figures would probably be higher. Approximately 4,000,000 interviews are carried out with members of the British public each year. Thus the total annual expenditure on surveys must run to tens of millions of pounds. Much of this money is wasted, either because the data collected are never used or because those responsible for commissioning or conducting the surveys are intellectually bankrupt and/or technically incompetent.

It was in order to get value for money expended on surveys that the British Social Science Research Council established in 1970 its own Survey Unit, with Mark Abrams as Director, to provide advice and assistance to academics and others doing surveys on public funds. Between 1970 and 1975 the SSRC handed out £ 2,260,000 for projects based on survey research or similar techniques. Leaving aside the handful of recipients who might be regarded as even remotely competent in survey methods, fewer than 8% of the rest ever sought advice from the Unit. In 1976, after a bitter struggle, with international repercussions, the SSRC closed the Unit.

This much awaited book goes some, but by no means all, of the way towards filling the gap left by the closure of the SSRC Survey Unit. It also fills a gap in the literature by being presented as a companion volume to the technically excellent, but unexciting, standard work by Moser and Kalton. With the exception of the OPCS Social Survey Division and the Survey Research Centre at Ann Arbor, no other survey organisation has codified practice in such detail. Along with these volumes, the intending survey researcher needs only Sonquist & Dunkelberg on data processing to have no excuse at all for technical incompetence. Armed with all three, the members of funding agencies no longer have an excuse for handing out large sums of (public) money to amateurs.

As might be expected from one of Britain's leading survey research agencies, the book is strong on the day-to-day *practical* aspects of surveys, particularly sampling, interviewing and field organisation, including mail-surveys. It is packed with useful hints and examples, but these tend to be lost in a somewhat discursive text and might have been better summarised in checklists or flowcharts. Social scientists will probably find the book lacking in intellectual clout and fellow practitioners may be disappointed in the weak treatment of important aspects of methodology such as documentation, secondary analysis and the use of archives. Problem formulation, the key to all good research, is rather skated over and there is nothing to speak of on analysis and computing. This latter is a flaw since it is data processing and statistical analysis which is usually the downfall of many social surveys, in spite of

the availability of packages such as SPSS, P-STAT and OSIRIS. Too many incompetent researchers use "computer problems" as an excuse for delayed or uncompleted projects. A chapter on costing would have been an advantage. The chapter on sampling is an excellent non-technical treatment (it is 12 pages before an equation appears!) which is no mean feat. The effect of sample design on survey costs is alluded to, but not followed up.

The chapters on interviewing and fieldwork organisation should be compulsory reading for all applicants to funding bodies and for all funding referees. The intellectual arrogance of academic social scientists ranged against the technical arrogance of many survey practitioners has led to much sterile and pointless debate. These chapters may help to restore some sanity if they discourage the use of students or other amateurs instead of properly trained professionals. As Sir Claus Moser says in his Foreword:

Too many people think that anyone with reasonable common sense can carry out a good survey. Common sense is an important ingredient. But the competent practitioner must also have an understanding of statistical theory (certainly if sampling is involved), familiarity with sociological and psychological methods, and enough knowledge of computing techniques to plan for handling large quantities of data. The pitfalls are many, and the world is littered with poor surveys, carried out at considerable cost to the sponsor and unnecessary inconvenience to the respondents. To avoid them requires both training and practical experience in the social sciences.

There are useful chapters on postal surveys and respondent classification.

Other chapters on unstructured design work and questionnaire construction are adequate, but the chapter on data-preparation is particularly weak and misleading. An excellent final note discusses ethical, methodological and epistemological issues, and the political implications of survey research.

In spite of the weakness of parts of the book, it should be recommended reading for survey research trainees, especially if they are social science students with an anti-empirical streak, but work should start now either on a second edition, or on a third companion volume focused on theoretical and practical aspects of survey analysis. Meanwhile there should be a copy of this book in every library, in every academic social science department, and in every research centre or unit in the land. It might result in fewer surveys, but they will undoubtedly be of better quality for its reading.

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