FOR595C Survey Methods

Your research sponsor believes in the following principles for all survey research. Explain concisely why these principles might not always be true.

(1) Given a budget for implementing a mail survey, it is best to maximize the number of questionnaires mailed out in order to get the largest sample size possible.

The premise for this question is that someone else has (a) set your survey budget and (b) decided that your survey will be conducted by mail. You have to decide how best to allocate the given budget to conduct a mail survey. Rather than simply mailing out the greatest number of questionnaires possible given that budget, it would be better to send a smaller number of questionnaires using Dillman's total design method with pre-notice and follow-up questionnaires. This can be quite expensive – especially if you include a monetary incentive with the second mailing and use a differentiated delivery method like priority mail or federal express for the last mailing. However, survey research has clearly shown that this strategy of multiple contacts usually results in a greater response rate than just mailing out the maximum number of questionnaires. This is true even if you have the resources for a census – mailing questionnaires to everyone in your sampling frame. Finally, even if the largest mailing resulted in the largest sample size, that would only reduce sampling error, perhaps at the expense of many other types of survey error.

(2) Every survey question should be short and simple - that is, use as few and as simple words as possible.

This falls in the category of good advice becoming bad advice when applied as a blanket rule. For example, if your target population is generally well-educated, then you risk "talking down" to them by sticking to the KISS principle, thereby discouraging them from completing the questionnaire (by annoying them or suggesting that it is really not meant for them). Keeping questions short often involves a trade-off with the total number of questions and therefore the length of the questionnaire. Simple words and short questions may also have more ambiguous meaning, thereby becoming more difficult to understand than more specific terms used more specifically. Or simple and short might provide reliable answers that are not valid for your research question.

(3) Every survey question should have answer categories - that is, avoid open-ended questions.

In general, it is best to provide answer categories because this makes it easier for respondent/ interviewer to record responses and easier to enter the data, avoiding errors due to difficulty reading handwriting or inconsistent coding. But when (a) there are many possible answers and (b) the answer is likely to be short and provided in a standard format, then an open-ended format may be best. For example, in survey of landowners, it may make sense to list the names of associations because otherwise respondents might record variations on names that would be difficult to code. On the other hand, it would be best simply to ask an open-ended question about county of residence, rather than listing every county. As another example, asking the year that someone was born is likely to call less attention to the question about age and take less time/space than reading/printing a long series of age categories. But age may be a more sensitive topic for some target populations, and especially if you are sure that you will aggregate responses

into broad categories (young, middle-age, old), then it may be best to list these answer categories. Another reason to consider open-ended questions would be to avoid biasing responses or because you specifically want to know what is the first thing that comes to someone's mind (e.g., what is the first thing that comes to mind as a symptom of rabies). Finally, "venting question" at the end of the survey are by definition open-ended, and these are valuable questions both from the perspective of the interview process and for insights that become the hypotheses for your next survey research project.

(4) (6 minutes)
Describe two advantages and two disadvantages of survey mode A vs. survey mode B.

- *Mode A: mixed mode survey, with potential respondents first contacted by email and directed to a website, and then non-respondents contacted and interviewed by telephone.*
- *Mode B: standard mail survey.*
- *Assume that you have good sampling frames for both options (e.g., membership list for an association with postal & email addresses and phone numbers), and*
- *Assume that you could implement either type of survey following total design principles, for same budget.*

Mode A advantage (and Mode B disadvantage): this is likely to expand the pool of respondents, because different types of people will be more likely to respond to telephone survey than to internet survey. The net effect should be to reduce non-response bias, because there is less chance of excluding a particular portion of sampling frame (e.g., people who delete all emails from unknown addresses, or people who only answer calls from known phone numbers).

Mode A advantage (and Mode B disadvantage): both internet and telephone interviews allow control over question sequence, allowing for more complex skip and branching patterns, without confusing respondent or resulting in missing data.

Mode A advantage (and Mode B disadvantage): both internet and telephone (CATI) interviewing eliminate data entry, thereby eliminating delay, costs and errors associated with data entry. These modes can also supply more meta-data, such as the time required to answer each question and whether respondent changes his/her mind about answer to a question.

Mode A disadvantage (and Mode B advantage): the questionnaire would have to be designed for consistent application across a visual and aural mode - this is likely to mean that cannot use best/standard question and answer formats for each individual mode, because have to write so that same question can be asked in same way across modes; alternatively, if questions vary across modes, this creates difficulties with analysis. For example, if differences appear across respondents to internet and telephone survey, it will be difficult to tease out whether these are due to the different types of people who respond (see above advantage) or the different modes.

Mode A disadvantage (and Mode B advantage): there are well-tested protocols for maximizing response rates to mail surveys (i.e., Dillman Total Design), whereas internet surveys are a relatively new area with many unknowns

Mode A disadvantage (and Mode B advantage): the researcher has less control over the appearance of web surveys (which depend on browser settings, monitor size, speed of connection), and interviewer bias (including acquiescence, reluctance to answer sensitive questions) is an issue with telephone survey