

Social survey research: two types of knowledge

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To my mind, in the UK, there is a major divide between the kinds of knowledge held by survey experts in research agencies and those in academia which works to the detriment of survey research. I shall portray this divide over-starkly, but I think it is right to do so – there is a serious point to be made. My thesis is simply stated. Agencies are strong on practice and weak in theory whereas academic survey experts show the opposite qualities. To borrow Gilbert Ryle's terminology, agency practitioners are strong on knowing *how* whilst academics are strong on knowing *that*¹.

In the agencies we know how to write questionnaires, design samples, collect data and report results efficiently and quickly. But our knowledge of the ways that our results may be substantially compromised by errors of representativeness and measurement are often very limited². We are too ready to judge a method by whether it has "worked" in the past in the sense of getting answers from respondents that are not obviously implausible – a state of affairs which is perfectly compatible with wildly inaccurate results.

But, although survey specialist³ academics may know the theory and published findings, many would be hard put to write a useable 45-minute interview questionnaire in two days flat, let alone to set up and implement a survey with celerity. And academics' reliance on the published literature can lead them, for example, to insist on survey questions that any experienced practitioner knows will not be understood or answered in the manner intended, or to demand response rates which are unachievable given the salience of the survey topic and length of the interview.

This would not be a problem if the groups' respective strengths were mutually acknowledged, and if run of the mill surveys benefited from these strengths in equal measure. But mutual suspicion amongst the two groups can prevent this from happening. In the agencies, the term "academic" is sometimes regarded as almost synonymous with "impractical" or not taking account of a posited "real world", an attitude which can lead to blithe disregard of very real survey errors. And academics often appear to regard agencies as fieldwork agencies which have relatively little to offer the survey process other than fieldwork and coding resources – with consequent disparagement of their craft-based research skills.

This division of expertise and mutual suspicion can lead

to the two kinds of survey expert living in a kind of semi-detached symbiosis with one another, and works to the detriment of social research in the UK. For example:

- practitioners make needless mistakes because they lack a depth understanding of survey error
- most UK surveys (e.g. those not using random probability) receive almost no serious academic methodological attention and suffer as a result
- academic commentary and expectations about surveys can be very unrealistic

If this is as much of a problem as I suggest, what might be done about it? A few obvious ideas would include:

- having academics take secondments in agencies and agency staff taking academic secondments
- establishing formal links between agencies and academic departments with resource sharing – giving academics access to new data and practitioners access to electronic libraries
- encouraging academics and agency practitioners to co-author papers
- improving the quality of formal survey training for both academics and practitioners

At the start I said that I have caricatured the academic practitioner divide, and it is only fair to say that some academics and practitioners do not fit my stereotypes. Indeed, some of what I have recommended is happening – but still very much at a cottage industry level. Will we make more significant progress in bridging the divide? I rather doubt it. So long as many clients are happy not to interrogate the veracity of the data supplied by agencies, and so long as academics can make a career out of analysing survey data without having to get their hands dirty collecting it, where will be the motive for real change?

References

¹ Gilbert Ryle (1949). *The Concept of Mind*, London: Hutchinson.

² As set out in, for example, Groves, Robert M., Fowler, Floyd J., Couper, Mick P., Lepkowski, James M., Singer, Eleanor and Tourangeau, Roger (2009). *Survey Methodology*. New York: Wiley.

³ By which I mean the relatively small number of UK academics who have specialised to some degree in survey methodology. My discussion does not relate to the much larger group of academics who have at one time or another analysed some survey data.