

Book Reviews

Books for review are to be sent to the Book Review Editor Jan Wretman, Statistical Research Unit, Statistics Sweden. S-115 81 Stockholm, Sweden.

LAVRAKAS P.J., Telephone Survey Methods: Sampling, Selection, and Supervision Wendy Sykes	415
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Lavrakas, P.J., Telephone Survey Methods: Sampling, Selection, and Supervision. (Applied Social Research Series, Vol. 7) Sage Publications, Newbury Park, CA, 1987, ISBN 0-8039-2634-0 and 0-8039-2635-9 (paperback), 157 pp.

Telephone Survey Methods is a practical manual, a book aimed at the “non-expert” in survey methods who wishes to carry out a survey by telephone (and using paper and pencil rather than computer assisted techniques). Covering three important aspects of the telephone survey process – sampling, respondent selection, and interviewing – the book’s main contribution to the literature on telephone surveys is the wealth of (“seemingly mundane”) detail it supplies. It is precisely this detail which the survey researcher will often spend fruitless hours scouring textbooks for: what are the step-by-step procedures for generating a random digit dialling sample; should interviewers be paid per hour or per interview; what survey documents, apart from the questionnaire, will be useful; and even which bits of the telephone equipment need cleaning, how often and with what.

The main substance of the book is launched in Chapter 2 with a discussion of ways of obtaining a telephone survey sample. Important factors affecting the choice of methods

are outlined and details of alternative approaches given.

Chapter 3 continues with a comprehensive account of how to manage the sample. Examples of the coverage include: deciding which sample units are to be tackled when, and by whom; keeping track of progress; documenting call and final outcomes (including document design); and so on. Different types of non-response are described and contingent strategies outlined. Finally, some guidelines are offered concerning response rates and methods for calculating them.

For a large proportion of telephone surveys, in particular those based on random digit dialling, an individual within a given sampling unit (typically, a household) is selected for interview only after telephone contact has been established with the unit. Chapter 4 deals with this important stage of the survey process, describing alternative selection strategies and outlining their main strengths and weaknesses. Some comments on introducing telephone surveys are also offered.

The final two chapters emphasise the relationship between interviewing standards and the quality of survey data obtained. Centralised telephoning arrangements are assumed, but much of what is covered applies equally to dispersed interviewing.

The pros and cons of using paid, as opposed to volunteer interviewers; recruitment and hiring practices; training schedules; and payment and other employment practices are all dealt with in Chapter 5. Chapter 6, on the other hand, looks at issues such as staffing levels, scheduling of interviewing, setting up interviewing stations, and quality control.

The fact that this book appears to be based more on acquired wisdom than experimental evidence is not necessarily a major criticism. There are sections (e.g., that on the scheduling of interviewing sessions) which would have been more authoritative if data supporting the recommendations had been supplied. But such data is not available for all aspects tackled by the book. As usual, methodological experimentation has lagged behind practical applications.

The book is also conspicuously written for the U.S. reader. (See, for example, the sections on random digit dialling.) Again this need not be a problem. In general, it is the principles and not the particulars which are of importance and, by and large, these are clear – even if the non-American has to work

a little harder to extract them. But it does mean that some recommendations require critical interpretation in the light of local circumstances.

Each chapter concludes with a series of exercises. Examples include: producing an advertisement for hiring interviewers; using data given in a table to calculate response rates; generating a sample of telephone numbers “by hand” using random number tables; reviewing another textbook that compares telephone and face to face surveys, and summarising the arguments. It would be interesting to know how many readers (other than students) actually do these exercises.

Finally, a more extensive bibliography would have made a useful addition for those readers wishing to pursue the topic a stage further. Fewer than twenty references are listed which relate specifically to telephone surveys, and this is a very small percentage of the growing literature in the field.

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