April 19 Factorial Surveys

Factorial surveys: Basic idea is to apply experimental design in a survey. Randomly assign people to a group. The difference in treatment is something about the question or the way it is presented. Things you can look at:

1. question wording, or information in question: Might wonder if asking the question a different way, or including different information, affects the way people respond.

Example: (Gallup Poll, 1940) "Some people say American young men are lazy and soft and need to be toughened up. Do you agree?"

Yes	48%
No	46%
DK	7%

"A university professor says American young men are lazy and soft and need to be toughened up. Do you agree?"

Yes	48%
No	44%
DK	8%

Didn't seem to matter whether you attributed the statement to "a university professor" or "some people"

Since people are randomly assigned to get one question or the other, you know that any difference is because of the question, not because of the sort of people who were asked.

Another example--people much more likely to say "aid to poor people" should be increased than "welfare" should be increased. (About 65% vs 25%). This is different enough so that you might not want to call it the same question, but it's still an interesting comparison.

Why not ask people both the welfare and aid to poor people questions? The fact that they've answered one question one way might affect their answers to the other.

2. question order: for example, does it matter if you ask a question about aid to the poor after a question about taxes or before?

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3. Vignettes: describe a particular situation, and ask people what they think about it. Vary the characteristics of the situation, and see if it affects response. E. g., criminal sentencing, fair pay, characterization of various actions (is this an example of discrimination? How wrong is this? etc.) Uses: figure out the principles people use in judging the situations. Why not just ask them directly? For example, "should people with children get paid more than people without children?" Might be interesting to ask that, but the principles that they really apply may be different from those that they say they would apply. The vignette method is particularly useful for finding evidence of unconscious bias. Also for complicated questions where people may not be able to articulate general principles.

The simplest form would have a matched groups, and vary only one variable. For example, give capsule descriptions of crimes and the people who committed them, and ask what would be a reasonable sentence. You would have another list that was exactly the same, except that one characteristic was reversed--for example, race. Then for each question you would see which got the more severe recommended sentence--the crime when described as done by a black person, or as described when done by a white person. More complicated designs would systematically vary several factors.

To do a factorial survey, you would have different forms for the surveys. Interviewer would alternate, or would decide which one to use based on a table of random numbers. Possible to get many different forms by combining multiple factors.

Field experiments: experiments in natural settings. Difficult to do, because your ability to control what happens is limited. But sometimes possible, as with the resume experiment described in the reading for today. Basically, potential employers were used as the subjects--they were sent a resume from a fictitious person with either a "white" or a "black" sounding name. Question was whether there was a difference in the rate of responses depending on the name. In fact, there was.

Could also think of it as a vignette study--each resume is a vignette, or summary of a situation. Difference is that they weren't just asking people about the vignettes hypothetically, they were observing what they actually did.

The study was a real experiment, even though it didn't take place in a laboratory. Randomly chose employers for different treatment. By taking place in a natural setting, the advantage that employers didn't know that they were being used in the experiment. Therefore, the investigators could be sure that

they were acting naturally. (If they'd known that they were part of an experiment, they probably would have made efforts not to discriminate).

Had some important limitations: probably the biggest one is that they could only consider callbacks, not actual hiring. However, also had some major advantages because of the experimental design. If you're considering real black and white applicants, very difficult to know that they're actually matched on all things that are relevant to ability to do the job.

Experiments like this raise some ethical issues. Basically, you're using someone else in your research without their permission. This is considered a bad thing--usually research is supposed to be based on "informed consent." Also, it involved some deception--sending resumes that were not real. For those reasons, some people might argue that this research was unethical. On the other side, this study didn't have much potential to cause any stress or embarrassment to anyone. The only harm to the companies was the minor cost of processing a few extra bogus applications. Many researchers consider deception or using people unknowingly to be matters of degree--if you're doing something that could cause harm, or would be a major cost to the "subjects," that would be unethical. But if it's a minor, impersonal interaction like this one, that would be all right, especially if the research is dealing with an important issue.

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Ethical issues: Ethical issues could be broken into several parts.

(1) Goal of social science is to get answers to questions--either descriptive (how things are) or explanatory (how they got that way) . But there are things that might be effective, in the sense of helping you to find things out, but would nevertheless be wrong. So to some extent ethics involves setting boundaries on research.

(2) Another part is setting standards that contribute to advancing knowledge, not individual careers or somebody's social or political goals. For example, making the information you used in an analysis available to other people so that they can analyze it in their own way--even if they hope to show that your conclusions were wrong.

(3) A third part is balancing various goals and standards. There may be different principles that you accept as reasonable, but they seem to conflict in a particular situation. Many of the things described in the article on researching people with AIDS are of this third type. For example, requests for help or advice--"saying nothing did not feel ethical to me. Yet saying something required me to break professional norms for sociological research." Doesn't say what those norms are, but I assume that they're about not going beyond your professional expertise in giving advice. That is, being a sociologist doesn't qualify you to offer medical or psychological treatment. So I think that the way she interpreted the professional norms was that they were saying that she couldn't deal with those issues and they should take them to a qualified professional. For the particular things that she mentions, I don't see much of a dilemma--that is, I wouldn't interpret what she did as breaking professional norms. But there are cases that would present a real problem--for example, someone who became very dependent on you for advice. Also mentions concern that getting a signed consent form, which is a standard part of research, would potentially mean that people could be identified by government authorities.

On the first issue, one point that's generally accepted is "informed consent"--people have to freely agree to participate; not be forced to or pressured to. Should be especially sensitive to this in any institutional setting, like schools or hospitals. Also should be informed of any risks. Physical harm isn't usually a risk in sociological research, but stress or embarrassment might be. Can't describe exactly what might happen, but if there was any potential for an unpleasant experience, you'd want to tell people that in a general way.

Deception--Some people argue that deception is always wrong. You ought to be honest with people about what you're trying to learn. If you take this position, a lot of experimental research is ruled out. As I've mentioned, often investigators deliberately mislead people about the purpose of experiments. One

common practice is to use a 'confederate' who appears to be a subject but is actually working with the investigator (Milgram experiment--man who was getting "shocked"). Usually the true purpose of the experiment is disguised—the investigators invent a cover story so that people will act in a more natural, less self-conscious way. Generally have a "debriefing" afterwards in which the investigators looks for any possible distress; people may be told of the purpose of the experiment at that point, or at least if someone was actually a confederate. The defense of deception is that it doesn't do any harm, and that people are told afterwards. In effect, you could say it's a necessary part of the game--like if you're playing poker, deception (bluffing) is OK, and would be distinguished from cheating.

Harm--obviously harming people is considered undesirable. Harm could be either physical or emotional. But this is matter of degree--lots of studies cause some discomfort. As the book points out, even a survey might cause people to feel bad if you ask about some sensitive topic. And what's sensitive varies form person to person. For example, even a routine question about marital status could be distressing to someone who's spouse has just died, or if an engagement has just been broken. Basically, the standard is that it's unethical to do something that one could expect would cause significant distress to most people. But then we have an issue of setting a boundary--when does minor discomfort become "harm"?

Standards have been getting stricter here--e. g., the Milgram 'obedience to authority' experiments would never be approved today. It appears that the didn't cause any lasting problems for the subjects--on debriefing, most of them said that they were glad they participated, and felt like they learned something valuable. But now, even the potential to cause serious distress would be enough to get an experiment stopped.

April 25, 2004 Experiment about social snubs (link on the web site) is an example of something that is regarded as acceptable today. Why? After all, it says that some people were really upset. "It is just heartbreaking to watch...This really affects the person afterwards. They report feeling social distress."

Presumably partly because it's a short-term thing. But so was the Milgram experiment. One difference was that the Milgram experiment had the potential to make people feel guilty about what they'd done. This study didn't--people thought that they were being treated badly for no reason. And while that's unpleasant at the time, it's not something that people will carry away with them after they learn that it was just a set-up.

Important to try to minimize any distress. That is, try not to go farther than you really need for the purpose of the experiment. Interesting thing about the social exclusion experiment is that being left out of a computerized game vs. people you didn't know was enough to produce reports of distress. I would have expected that you'd have to do something like exclude people from a conversation. I'm not sure how they arrived at this particular way of doing things--probably some of it was technical requirements. However, it's possible to do some preliminary testing that showed that your treatment is going to be enough to produce some reaction. That would be a good thing, so that you don't cause any more distress than you have to.

Another issue to be considered is the importance of the research topic. That is, if the experiment is likely to uncover something that would make people's lives better, causing some distress is more justifiable than if it's just to satisfy someone's curiosity. But many of the studies that seem most unethical today were done because they seemed to deal with something important.

Selective distribution of benefits--so far, I've been talking about negative things. But some experimental studies, especially in real-world settings, give benefits to some people. For example, experiment with the effects of smaller classes gave smaller classes to some students. Conceivably, that could even go on to have substantial effects on their later lives. Experiments usually use random assignment to groups, for reasons I've discussed before--you want to make the groups as nearly identical as you can, and the best way to that it to assign people at random. Some people regard it as unfair to have benefits allocated randomly to different groups. In fact, this is one of the reasons that it's difficult to maintain random assignment in 'real-world' experiments. Why not give the benefit to people who need it most, or who have done most to deserve it?

Basic justification: experiments would be used only when there is doubt about which is better. If you already know, then you don't need to do the experiment. So it's not clear whether you're giving out a benefit or doing harm or making no difference at all. In this case, making a random decision about how to

treat people is as fair a way as any. While letting people go into the group they want to would make them happier, it would deprive everyone else of the benefit of learning the truth about what works better.

In effect, you can say that people in the experiment are entering a lottery where they have a chance of getting some benefit, and a chance of being the same as they were before.

Other kinds of research: survey research doesn't present major ethical issues. Should protect people's confidentiality by removing identifying information like names and phone numbers. Some surveys take extra steps to prevent identification. For example, census collects information on income. Some census data is released for research with names and exact addresses removed. But in some cases you might be able to identify people--e. g., someone with a very high income. If you combine that with things the town or county, plus information like, age and number of children people might be able to figure out who it is. So they group some information in categories, like $150,000+ for income, or even alter some of it.

As far as harm, the worst thing you can do in a survey is ask someone a question they find embarrassing or offensive. But it's not in your interest to do that, since then they're likely to refuse to participate. So surveys usually steer clear of things that they think might bother people. In fact, survey researchers may have been more cautious than they needed to be. It used to be very rare to ask about sexual behavior, because most researchers figured that people wouldn't answer. But with the rise of AIDS, some researchers decided that the issue was important enough so that they should try. Found that there were fewer problems with refusals than they expected.

Ethnography or fieldwork--basically, going out and observing and talking to people in a natural setting over a period of time. This raises significant ethical issues--as with experiments, you can have a real impact on people's lives. Also, since you spend a lot of time with people, you can develop an attachment to them, or they can develop an attachment to you. If people come to think of you as a friend, rather than a researcher, they may feel betrayed if you write things that are critical of them. Conversely, if you start thinking of them as friends, that may make you reluctant to report things that are critical of them. On the other hand, it's not reasonable to ask researchers to keep the people being studied at arm's length. Probably will make you a less effective researcher; also may conflict with the researcher's "human" obligations.

Hard to lay down absolute rules. Basically, researchers make choices depending on their values and the specific situation. For example, if you see something illegal or ethical going on should you (a) just let it happen (b) try to discourage people from doing it (c) report it to the authorities? Would have to

balance the offense vs. the benefits of the study, consider any promises you'd made (or implied). One thing that's considered pretty much an absolute is confidentiality. Don't use real names, suppress or alter identifying details, so that no one can even make a good guess. If you're studying an organization, like a school or a factory, you usually don't reveal it's name. Even with a study of a town, most researchers would try to keep it secret. Of course, sometimes it becomes pretty obvious, or you're not revealing anything that would embarrass anyone in particular. In that case, some researchers would use the real name. Others, however, would still try to keep it secret. Some people argue that this tradition has gone overboard--prevents other researchers from checking or replicating research. Also may limit the extent to which the people being studied can have their say.

With some professions (doctors, priests) confidentiality is protected by law. However, with sociology, there is no legal right to keep information secret if there's a criminal investigation. However, as the book describes, some researchers have spent time in jail rather than reveal their sources.

Apr 27 Comparative research.

In a sense, you could say that almost all research is comparative: younger with older, men with women, more educated with less educated. But "comparative research" is usually used to mean research with units of analysis that are bigger than individuals. Especially applied to research comparing "societies", which in the modern world is usually thought of as equivalent to nations. But sometimes you might regard a nation as composed of multiple societies, or a society as going beyond the boundaries of a nation.

May be qualitative or quantitative: if qualitative, it involves essentially telling stories of cases, looking back and forth among them to note similarities and differences. If quantitative, involves classifying or ranking societies in terms of variables, looking for relations between them.

Comparative research was the major method in sociology at one time. Looked at historical evidence on different societies, tried to draw parallels and differences. It's become less common for several reasons: new methods of collecting information, specialization of academic life, and an increased sense that the modern world is basically different from past societies.

But some kinds of comparative research have been growing agian in recent years, because of increased availability of quantitative data on nations. A particular growth area: comparative survey research. You can ask the same questions of people in different nations, and then look at the differences among nations. The idea is pretty simple, but it was difficult to do until recently. Problems--getting permission to do surveys, especially in countries with non-democratic government, difficulty of doing surveys in many countries. Still easier to do surveys in affluent countries--can take a more or less representative sample more easily contact people by telephone. Also, people are more familiar with the idea of answering surveys.

Issues: 1. Language: need to translate questionnaires into local language (or languages). Not just a matter of getting the dictionary meaning right, but conveying the same thing to the average person. Sometimes you need to make some changes even in countries that use the same laguage--particular word may suggest different things. Desirable to check by back-translation, pilot tests in different countries.

2. Samples: ideally, you would have random samples from the whole nation. But this is difficult in some countries. Often in poorer countries samples are taken mainly from urban areas. Also, middle class and educated people may be over-represented. This is better than nothing, but need to recognize the possibility that the people in the sample are different from the national population.

3. Choice of countries: ideally, you would look at all countries, or a random sample of countries. But this is impossible in practice, so it's usually necessary to take sort of a convenience sample of countries. Still, you can make it a priority to try to get certain kinds of countries in it--usually, would try to cover a wide range in terms of history, culture, economic development.

Why are there national differences? One possibility is that it's because of "composition" of the national population. Say that factors like age, education, income, urban residence affect individual opinion. Then if people in different countries differ in average educational level, then average opinions will differ too. But usually there are some national differences that can't be explained that way. That is, if you match people in different countries in terms of age, education, etc. there are still national differences. Also, the effects of different these factors may differ between countries. For example, research in the US shows that education makes people more liberal on various social issues (acceptance of homosexuality, abortion, ethnic and racial tolerance). But is this true everywhere, or just in some societies? This issue has practical as well as theoretical significance--can we expect change in attitudes in other societies as education becomes more widespread?

Explaining national differences: can take an inductive or deductive approach. Inductive--look at countries, see if there seem to be any patterns. Deductive: try to develop hypotheses about why countries will be different. In either case, would then try to measure the factors that you think are important, and relate them to the national differences.