

Attitudes About Surveys, 1985 and 2005

John Goyder, University of
Waterloo

Claire Durand, Université de
Montréal

Presentation at RC-33 Conference, Naples, 2008

Research on attitudes toward survey response

- Hypothesis: response rates and attitudes are reciprocally related, so that if favourable attitude toward the survey method declines over time response rates decline
- Counterfactual: so much of response behaviour is situational that causation along Ajzen's path of *attitude* → *intention* → *behaviour*
- is scarcely detectable

The Research Setting

- Research in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.
 - Population some 450,000, CMA, as of 2006 census
 - Traditionally a manufacturing centre with large component German origins to population
 - In the post-industrial age, a mixed population, many immigrants as for most of urban Canada, silicone valley pretensions (home of RIM- Blackberry!)
 - Well-studied site, with many response examples

- Research in the 1980s:
 - A sample from 1982, mainly personal interview with some mailed contacts
 - Another from 1985, by telephone

Research in 2005:

-Replication of many of the 1980s items, within a mailed questionnaire (with web option) having a cash incentives experimental cell

Research planned for Fall 2008:

-Some confirmatory further fieldwork

Sample details

	N	Response %
1982	86	64.7
1985	86	65.2
2005 \$ 5	472	59.4
2005 no cash	318	40.0

Main Findings

- Attitude toward surveys has, taking all items together, become neither more unfavourable nor more favourable
- Mode preference has shifted sharply toward mail and away from telephone contact
- Criteria for responding or not have shifted in a “generation me” direction

Series of questions about polls →

Public opinion polls make the country more democratic

The biggest problem with opinion polls is the way they distort the meaning of result

Most opinion surveyors have faked their result on one occasion or another

Government pays too much attention to opinion polls

Opinion surveyors interview too few people for results to be accurate for the whole population

Opinion surveyors are just out to make money

Opinion polls are an invasion of privacy

Opinion polls do no harm

Attitude Analysis

- Factor analysis suggests (i) validity issues (ii) single item about democracy (iii) privacy
- People in 2005 both have greater concern about privacy and belief that polls help democracy (main finding from m'variate work is, more educated, more favourable)

More evidence that there is no
wholesale attitudinal rebellion
against surveying →

If a Statistics Canada interviewer called at your door, would you feel you had to answer the survey, no matter what the questions were about?

	1980s	2005 with incentive	2005, no incentive
No or “could not say”	70.2%	46.7%	46.7%
Yes	29.8	53.3	53.3
Base N’s	151	467	315

Chi square $p < .001$ for whole table

1.1% item nonresponse.

Mode preference: **Big Change**

- Prefer mailed contact
- 1982 personal l'view 43.3%
- 1982 mailed contact 54.2%
- 1985 telephone contact 57.8
- 2005 mailed contact 90.1

Stated criteria for response decisions

- There seems to be a trend toward “personal convenience” considerations for response decisions. E.g.:
- “What you are doing when the interviewer calls” was very or extremely important to—
– **26% in the 1980s / 72% in 2005**

Another example

- “Whether the topic of the survey is interesting”
- Important to
- **44% in 1980s/ 54% in 2005**

Whereas considerations such as sponsor have lost importance . . .

- “Whether the survey is sponsored by a university”
- **75%** say important in 1980s,
24% in 2005

The link between attitude and
behaviour becomes
understandable when considered in
terms of mode preferences

Response norms in Kitchener-Waterloo

	<u>1980s</u>	<u>2000s</u>
• Telephone	60-69%	30-39%
• or personal		
• Mail, with \$	60-75%	60-75%
• See handout for detailed figures		

Two things learned from the study:

- 1. The shift in preference toward the mailed mode helps explain the continuing success of postal surveys – that is where attitude fits in
- 2. The optimal arguments to present to householders have switched to a “me-centered” focus