And the Survey Says...
Survey research begins and ends with numbers—there’s U.S. Census data to consider, phone numbers to dial, response rates to calculate, data to code, and results to tabulate. And in the Survey Research Laboratory (SRL) at the University of Illinois, getting those numbers right is the first priority.

With responsibilities for providing survey research services to University faculty, staff, and students, governmental agencies, and others working in the public interest, SRL is a one-stop survey shop. The staff handles complete survey projects from initial study design through data analysis as well as partial survey work, such as sampling, questionnaire design, focus group coordination, data collection, data reduction, and consulting on specific survey problems.

In the 40 years that SRL has been providing these services, organizations and businesses have increasingly turned to surveys as a source of information on everything from spending patterns to television viewing habits. And as the desire for information has grown, so has the need for help in making sure that the right questions are asked of the right people.

A Question of Design
Sharon Shavitt, a professor of business administration and research professor in the SRL, knows how important proper methodology is to achieving reliable, accurate survey results, and she shares this knowledge through her research.

According to Shavitt, social factors strongly affect survey participants and, consequently, they impact survey results. “Understanding the way people answer questions is relevant to improving survey methods. The survey interview is a social interaction and is subject to the same influences of any social interaction.” Noting the importance of trust, self-awareness, and motivation in participants, Shavitt said that “asking people to engage in thinking about and calculating answers where they have to search their memory and work to do it is an issue of motivation.” She explained that the best way to combat the problems of motivation is to design questions that can yield the most honest and complete answers but that are relatively painless for the respondent. Creating a survey that meets both needs can be difficult for those untrained in survey design, which is why SRL provides assistance in those areas.

Phrasing is also essential to obtaining valid survey results. According to Shavitt, when designing a survey it is important to look at each question carefully and think about whether it is clear and whether it helps the respondent to give a complete answer. People falsely assume that succinct questions lead to the best answers because respondents will not be confused by wordiness. However, longer questions often get more valid results because they “provide cues to help respondents recall relevant instances,” Shavitt explained. For instance, consider the question:

How many trips do you take in your automobile on a typical weekday? This could include driving your children to school or to activities, driving to work, driving to a store or to other places of business, going out for entertainment, and taking other trips. Be sure to count return trips separately.

This is a long question, but according to Shavitt it is much better than asking simply:

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With this shorter question, “the respondent might have a harder time understanding it or remembering all of the relevant instances and so will give you a less accurate response,” she said.

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Making it Personal to Generate Responses

The growth in the number of surveys people are asked to complete has caused response rates to decrease to an average of about 30 percent. But, said Shavitt, there are personalization techniques that increase the likelihood of participation. Often, people believe that impersonal tones are what interest participants, but they can have adverse effects.

"Things that personalize or appear to personalize the survey can dramatically increase the rate of response," she said. "This would include putting a Post-It note request on the survey packet or using a real stamp rather than a postage meter on the reply envelopes. These techniques attract attention to the survey request and convey the impression that there are real people on the other end of the survey request who are asking you to do them this favor." Other important ways to increase the response rate include following-up with postcards and phone calls.

The success of a survey also depends on a number of other conditions. Often one of the most important is making sure that a representative sample is drawn. Quality, not quantity, is what counts. "As long as you meet a minimum requirement, it isn't how many people you sample, it's who you sample that matters. In other words, if you are trying to draw conclusions about the characteristics of a given population, the most important characteristic of a sample is whether it truly represents that population," said Shavitt. For example, if you want to predict the outcome of a presidential election, the responses of 1,000 people randomly selected from the population of likely voters is much more useful than a sample of 100,000 museum patrons. The latter group is very likely to be biased in terms of education and income, and therefore cannot give you a valid prediction of the population's preferences.

How Cultural Differences Impact Survey Responding

As globalization continues to affect international communication and business relations, awareness of cultural variations is crucial to such topics as data collection. As part of SRL's 40th anniversary in 2004, the Sheth Foundation/Sudman Symposium on Cross-Cultural Survey Research was held on campus to discuss global survey measurement. Researchers from around the world shared their findings and perspectives on cognitive and psychological aspects affecting survey respondents as well as the challenges cultural boundaries create for data gathering.

Shavitt has a special research interest in cross-cultural factors affecting consumer persuasion, attitudinal and value judgments, and survey responding. At the symposium, she presented information on the relationship between cultural orientation and socially desirable responding, which is based on the research she conducted with Timothy Johnson, SRL director, and Ashok Lalwani, a PhD student in marketing. The research, to be published in an upcoming issue of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, addresses the relationship between individualistic and collectivistic cultural values or backgrounds and the ways people present themselves on surveys.

Previous research has shown that people with individualistic cultural values or backgrounds, such as people from the United States and Western Europe or people with a European cultural background, tend to emphasize independence, self-reliance, and a desire to be unique. On the other hand, people with collectivistic cultural values or backgrounds, such as people from East Asia or those with an Asian cultural background, emphasize interdependence with others, family and group goals, belongingness, and fitting in to their groups. As a result, Shavitt said, "Ashok, Tim, and I found that although people with both types of cultural backgrounds or values try to present themselves in a desirable way on surveys, they do so in distinct ways." Individualism was associated with self-deceptive enhancement (SDE), a type of desirable responding that involves inflating one's skills and abilities to present oneself in an unrealistically positive light. In contrast, collectivism was associated with impression management (IM), a type of desirable responding that involves misrepresenting one's actions in order to appear appropriate and to fit in with group norms.

The results show how socialization impacts the way people from each group answer questions. For instance, when taking a survey, people from a European-American background would be more likely than those from an East Asian background to claim that they are unusually perceptive, skillful, and able to work independently. In contrast, someone from an East Asian background would be more likely than someone from a European-American background to deny engaging in transgressions such as littering, speeding, or gossiping. This makes it difficult to compare, for instance, self-reported rates of misconduct across cultural groups. "Surveys conducted across cultures must consider the distinct ways in which national or ethnic groups are likely to answer certain types of questions," noted Shavitt. "It may mean, for instance, that someone from an European-American background would be more likely to admit to a bad pattern of consumer choices [IM], but also more likely to be overly optimistic about their ability to change that pattern on their own [SDE]. Our future research will address these sorts of implications."

In the last five to ten years, there has been an explosion in cross-cultural survey research and the issues that surround it. Sensitivity to cultural differences is critical for institutions that serve people of different populations. Said Shavitt, "As businesses become global, understanding the differences in how consumers answer questions is very important to conducting valid market research." - Rosalyn Yates

For more information on the services provided by the Survey Research Laboratory, contact SRL's main office at the University of Illinois at Chicago by calling 312-996-5300 or the office on the Urbana-Champaign campus at 217-333-4273. www.srl.uiuc.edu