Announcements

Our co-director John Goyder has been appointed Associate Dean of Arts Computing for one year beginning July, 2008. In As well, our co-director Mary Thompson has been awarded the 2007 Award of Excellence in Graduate Supervision. The SRC would like to congratulate both on their accomplishments.

This Spring term, 2008, the SRC had the opportunity to provide experience to a graduate student enrolled in the Specialization in Survey Methodology in the Sociology department. Alicia Tomaszczyk worked with SRC staff to review and report on recent survey research in relevant methodological issues, such as response rates for web surveys, the use of incentives, and effective introductory scripts for telephone interviews.

Also this Spring term, the SRC hosted a seminar presented by Dr. Sean T. Doherty of Wilfrid Laurier University entitled “Multi-sensor Monitoring of Patients’ Daily Life and Physiological Conditions: Emerging Technologies And Applications”. Dr. Doherty discussed the possibility of using GPS-enabled cellular phones to create an accurate measurement of activity levels and travel, and how this type of research could be used in the health field for patient monitoring and disease management.

The SRC offered a web survey design workshop this Fall term, which was open to all. Topics covered included design and implementation issues, including examples and strategies when planning a web survey, and some of the technical choices available to researchers. It was attended by both students and staff from many different departments on campus. The SRC provides quality web data through the sophisticated Sensus Web software package, which allows for multiple email contacts, quotas and branching, among many of the programming features.

While at the annual AAPOR conference in May, our co-director John Goyder and our Special Projects Manager Kathleen McSpurren attended the first conference meeting of the Association of Academic Survey Research Organizations (AASRO). The purpose of this association is to network university-based research centres across North America.

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SRC website: http://www.src.uwaterloo.ca
SWORDC website: http://tdr.tug-libraries.on.ca/SWORDC/SITE/SHome.html
**Studies in the Field**

**Engineering First Year Student Survey**
In the spring the SRC conducted an in-class web survey for the UW First Year Engineering Task Force. Students were asked about their study habits, the usefulness of various kinds of academic help and their feelings on their first term at UW. The surveys were conducted online, with SRC staff working with students in their computer labs to complete the process. Students who completed the survey were entered into a draw to win one of four iPods. The primary investigators were Dr. Ajoy Opal and Dr. Gordon Stubley of the Engineering Faculty.

**Ontario Power Generation**
The SRC is currently conducting an RDD telephone survey on behalf of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, who have partnered with Ontario Power Generation Corporation to examine behavioural risk factors and public awareness about dangers around hydroelectric generating stations and dam sites. Dr. Norman Giesbrecht of CAMH is an expert in the field of risk-taking behaviour. This is the first comprehensive survey about dam safety in Canada.

**NEWPATH**
Beginning in January 2009 the SRC will be conducting surveys on behalf of the Region of Waterloo with the aim of learning more about the impact of cityscape on health and the environment. Households will be contacted first by phone and will be asked to complete a two-day travel diary detailing all trips taken, activities participated in and food consumed. Researchers from the Universities of Waterloo, British Columbia and Alberta are also involved in this multi-wave study.

**WRAS**
This fall, the SRC is conducting the Waterloo Region Area Survey (formerly known as KWMAS), a cooperative venture with academics, local government and interest groups, to survey residents of the region on a variety of issues. The survey is mailed out in October to a random sample of area residents, from all three cities and four townships. This is the fifth time the Area Survey is being conducted.

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**The University of Waterloo Survey Research Centre offers:**

- A full range of survey services from design to data analysis.
- First consultation meeting free of charge.
- A professional CATI call centre for telephone surveys.
- Expertise in web and mail surveys, telephone and personal interviews.
- A high standard of research and strict adherence to protocols.
Surveys and Society: Three Recent Books
Review by John Goyder

Most people who use survey data realize there is a vast research literature on the method, and recognize names such as Dillman, Groves, Couper among the current generation of survey methodologists, or figures like Kish, Lazarsfeld or Hyman from the past. Less familiar is the work done over the years on the survey as a social institution, a part of modern societies, helping shape 20th and 21st century culture and being shaped in turn by the shifts in social environment happening each decade. These more contemplative works step back from the intricacies of question wording, response rates and standard error estimation and approach the survey at a systems level.

The foundational instance of this genre, still frequently cited, is Gallup and Rae’s The Pulse of Democracy: The Public-Opinion Poll and How it Works, from 1940. The current head of the Gallup Poll, Frank Newport, published Polling Matters: Why Leaders Must Listen to the Wisdom of the People in 2004. Both titles send a clear signal that surveys in the form of polls of public opinion about political issues of the day are essential aids to good government and the effective functioning of democracy. Granted, some people need persuading on that point. Locally, in the 2005 Kitchener-Waterloo Metropolitan Area Survey, a question asking whether opinion polls make society more democratic gave just over a third of the sample agreeing, 40% undecided and the other third in disagreement.


Page’s book comes from his PhD dissertation in political science in which he wanted to move beyond polls and voting to look into “what government officials do with the [survey] results and how they play a role in the policy-making process” (p. 3). Interviewing 95 politicians, government officials, pollsters and journalists along with examining archival materials around several policy case studies, Page concludes that polling does not simply convey the views of the citizenry to government, which then enacts the desired policies, as Gallup and Rae supposed. Instead, the function of polls is much more nuanced. Polls are most important as tools for communicating, testing out and “selling” to the public decisions governments already have decided on. Page demonstrates how policies are determined by a complex mix of factors and evolve over long periods. During the 1980s, for example, the federal government conducted many polls in Quebec on sovereignty-association, for the purpose, as one of Page’s informants recalled, of “tracking - are things getting better or are they getting worse? - as opposed to using the polls to say ‘Ah, that’s what we should do’ ” (p. 81). Polling is not the only way governments inform themselves about public opinion, and one of the strongest themes of the book is the importance of focus groups and simple main street conversations between M.P.s and constituents. Page’s second main substantive example, the Goods and Services Tax from the late 1980s, represents a case where government acted contrary to clear findings from polling. People didn’t want the GST, but the Mulroney government did. Gun control legislation introduced by the Chrétien government in the ‘90s illustrates the case of passive public opinion, the kind captured in polls, in disagreement with the opinion of activists. Activists such as hunters and gun club members opposed the firearms registry while general cross sections of the public supported it by wide margins. All-in-all, this well-done book convinces the reader that “opinion research affect(s) communications more than policy content” (p. 187).
For me, Peter Butler’s book on polling and public opinion is the least satisfying of the three, because it tries to do too many things at once. Still, for an audience of readers who need to use survey evidence in their work, but who know little about the method, there is useful material in Butler. For example, a primer in Chapter 1 about the social determinants of individual’s opinions and attitudes and the distinction between those two latter terms is effective. A short history of the survey method follows, with frequent reminders about the validity threats undermining polls. The notion that respondents seek to present a massaged image of themselves is a guiding theme here. The final three chapters (3 - Public Opinion and the Mass Media; 4- Public Opinion Polls and Social Policy; 5- Change and Stability in Opinions) have the sharpest bite. One theme follows the way in which, in the interaction between polls and the mass media, the poll often becomes the story. Another theme is the manipulation of a poll’s impact by giving results a deliberate spin. Butler is among those who believe that poll findings can alter the course of an election (p. 94). The first part of the chapter on Change and Stability moves from a focus on polls into a general sociology of social change over the past few decades. Demographically derived change is contrasted with cultural shift. The role of technology receives mention in an extended section on work and job satisfaction. Perhaps the most effective part of the book occurs, however, later in Chapter 5 with a presentation of poll data tracking changing Canadian opinion on two contemporary issues, gay marriage and national security post 9/11.

Sarah Igo’s The Averaged American reaches the farthest of the three, musing: “In what ways is a society changed by the very tools employed to represent it?” (p. 4). As befits an historian, Igo is especially effective in depicting a pre-surveyed culture in America, and the realization among people in the late 1930s that a powerful new force was arriving on the scene. “There is magic in graphs,” says one of her sources (p. 5). The Averaged American attracted a flurry of commentary on the AAPOR (American Association for Public Opinion Research) newsgroup last year. Along with some grumbling about Igo’s command of technical issues, the survey experts in the newsgroup weren’t very receptive to her main thesis: that the survey method was a contributing factor in the emergence of the United States as a truly national, indeed “mass,” society following World War Two. It may be the natural inclination of survey methodologists to wish that their method, being billed as highly scientific, is therefore socially neutral. The books by Page and Butler supply arguments to dispel that fond hope, and I found Igo’s thesis sociologically rich and worth considering, even if unprovable in a decisive survey methodology sense of passing a .05 significance test. She develops her thesis by examining three case studies: the Lynd’s Middletown study (Muncie, Indiana), early opinion polling by Gallup/Roper, and the Kinsey research on sexual behaviour. The arrival of the Gallup Poll circa 1935 is an obvious choice, but in a couple of senses the Lynd and Kinsey research is not fully representative of the survey method. Surveying was only one component of the Lynd project, making it rather distinct from the mono-method fixation of later survey researchers. And Kinsey’s sampling was non-random, whereas much of the validity claim of the survey method stems from its inference from sample to population. Other case studies might have been entertained - - the pioneering Elmira (New York) election survey of 1948 comes to mind. But one must agree with Igo, in view of her extensive documentation, that the Lynd and Kinsey research had uniquely high impact on the American public, and this criterion is crucial to her argument (p. 30). While a critic can challenge the choice of case studies and charge the author with privileging means over standard deviations (a point from the AAPOR discussions), there is a wonderful wealth of historical material uncovered in The Averaged American, ample to refute AAPOR grumps who claimed they learned nothing new from the book.

Igo’s book nicely rounds out the collective message from reading all three together. Page is talking about surveys and government. Butler tells us about surveys and the media. Igo illustrates through her three case studies how surveys have impact on individuals, prompting them to consider whether or not they are average members of their society. In each instance, the survey is an active cultural ingredient, not simply a neutral set of calipers having no effect on its surroundings.
Conducting interviews in the field poses many challenges to good data collection. Paper and pencil interviewing is still in use for surveys, despite many technological options. While in-person interviews come in many forms, there are two types that have realized much improvement over the paper and pencil method with some form of electronic data capture: intercept interviews (conducted in one place with recruitment from passersby) and door-to-door surveys. Laptops, Blackberry devices, pocket PCs and PDAs all have the possibility of data collection applications in the field. Choosing an approach requires matching the technological options available to the individual circumstances of the study.

Last year, the SRC invested in software and hardware to assist with data collection in the field, for either door-to-door or intercept interviews. There are many varied solutions in mobile computer assisted personal interview (MCAPI) technology, in terms of hardware/software combinations, to assist with face-to-face interviews. The SRC researched a number of these options and chose a technology solution that was cost-effective and easy to use. The Techneos Entryware™ questionnaire development software allows sophisticated programming of skips, branching and randomization. This software manages the hardware – the Palm Tungsten E2 handheld device in this case – very easily in terms of uploading questionnaires and downloading data once the interviews are done.

Two recent studies undertaken by the SRC for academic researchers applied this technological solution: Best Practices in Problem Gambling Research and the Woodstock Outdoor Smoking Ban Study. The gambling study compared responses of face-to-face (in-home) with telephone interviews for 3,000 cases in the Waterloo region. Half of these interviews were conducted door-to-door using the Entryware™ software and handheld Palm devices to collect the data. Since this study was conducted in the winter months of 2008, it was a true test of both the software and
hardware. The software proved very effective at handling a rather complex questionnaire. However, whether it was the amount of usage or the extreme cold temperatures, the Tungsten E2 devices did not fare well - 3 of 10 devices had technical malfunctions by the end of the study. No data was ever lost, but these Palms became unusable and could not be repaired for a reasonable cost. The second study in the City of Woodstock took place during the month of August, 2008. Students conducted intercept interviews in public places, rain or shine, for 9 days, during which the Palm devices safely and accurately collected data for 6 or more hours at a time. There were no technical failures during this short study period.

In March 2008, Dr. Anne Quah of the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Policy Evaluation Project (PI Dr. Geoff Fong of Psychology) carried out a pilot test of the use of handheld devices to gather data for the ITC Survey in Malaysia. This pilot involved the same software/hardware combination the SRC used. The ITC questionnaire is long and complex, and using handheld device rather than paper offered the possibility of convenience for the interviewers and ease of data capture. However, in the end it was decided not to use this data collection mode in the field. Poor lighting in the interview locations often made the screens difficult to see in the evening, when most of the interviewing was done. The team realized that the handhelds would have to be robust enough not to require maintenance in the course of a wave of fieldwork. And as Dr. Quah points out, "Weather too can play havoc in countries that have a monsoon season!"

The varied experiences between the ITC pilot study and the SRC surveys may reflect some cultural and environmental differences between Malaysia and Canada. For the SRC staff, poor lighting was never a complaint during the gambling study, when the days were short and almost all interviews were conducted on the doorstep in the dark. Overall, the SRC’s experience with the software was very good, and the hardware possibilities are flexible enough to potentially avoid the failures we found in the cold weather.