

2016

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Olson, Kristen, "Book Review: *Improving Survey Methods: Lessons from Recent Research*, Uwe Engel, Ben Jann, Peter Lynn, Annette Scherpenzeel, and Patrick Sturgis, eds." (2016). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications*. 646.
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Book Review

*Kristen Olson*¹

Uwe Engel, Ben Jann, Peter Lynn, Annette Scherpenzeel, and Patrick Sturgis, eds. *Improving Survey Methods: Lessons from Recent Research*. NY: Routledge, 2015, ISBN 978-0-415-81762-2, 430pps, \$165.

Improving Survey Methods: Lessons from Recent Research is a compilation of research by survey methodological leaders across Europe. The book is organized into eight sections – modes, interviewers, sensitive questions, web surveys, access panels, nonsurvey data collection, nonresponse, and missing data. Each section starts with a brief overview chapter followed by three or four (generally) empirical chapters. The chapters themselves vary in approach, with some being simple literature reviews, others reporting the results of a simple 2×2 experiment, and still others conducting extensive observational analyses. This volume is a clear indication that survey methodological research is strong in Europe.

The first section, “Survey Modes and Response Effects,” contains two chapters that make use of the German Priority Programme on Survey Methodology (PPSM) panel. First, there is an experimental comparison of scale labels and ‘don’t know’ options in telephone and web modes by De Leeuw and Hox (Chapter 3), showing differences across modes in the effects of full versus endpoint labeling and in the use of ‘don’t know’ options. Engel and Koster (Chapter 4) then look at measurement quality within one mode – telephone – as related to the effects of a variety of question features, such as response-option order, question wording, number of scale points, and variation by interviewer’s ratings of the respondent’s attention to the task. In the third mode chapter, Busse and Fuchs (Chapter 5) take a high-level look at the error structure of mobile phone surveys, providing an overview of mobile surveys in both Europe and the US with some empirical data on errors of nonobservation in these types of surveys. The empirical results from these chapters are interesting, although the section feels connected more by the “response effects” part of the section title than “survey modes.”

The second section, “Interviewers and Survey Error,” contains two chapters – one by Turner et al. (Chapter 7) examining interviewer variance effects in the National Travel Survey of Great Britain, and one by Menold et al. (Chapter 8) on a case-control study for a method to detect interviewer falsification (summarizing prior extended reports and papers). Both of these brief chapters were interesting and informative, and contribute to our understanding of interviewers and their effects on survey measurement. Less attention was given in this section to the role of interviewers in other survey error sources, although studying error sources other than measurement is challenging.

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Section III focuses on “Asking Sensitive Questions.” This section takes a different approach to sensitive questions than the traditional method of examining modes or question wording (for example, following [Tourangeau and Yan 2007](#)), with two chapters that focus on randomized response and similar techniques (Diekmann and Hoeglinger, Chapter 10; Krumpal et al., Chapter 11) and one using vignettes (Auspurg et al., Chapter 12). The chapter by Krumpal et al. (Chapter 11) provides a particularly useful overview of three groups of these methods, worth assigning in a graduate class.

The three strong contributions of Section IV turn to web surveys. The first chapter in this section by Bethlehem (Chapter 14) provides a succinct overview of nonobservation errors – coverage, sampling, and nonresponse – to consider when conducting web surveys. Chapter 15 by Vehovar, Petrovic, and Slavec is a particularly novel contribution on the information-communication technology software tools for questionnaire drafting and development. Although the design of the study in this chapter is somewhat limited (students in a graduate class; two single-topic questionnaires), this chapter provides important insights both into the time required for questionnaire development and into how computerized tools may or may not assist with this development. The final chapter in this section by Braun, Behr, Kaczmirek, and Bandilla (Chapter 16) demonstrates the strength of web surveys in cross-national surveys for using open-ended probes to understand answers to closed-ended questions. Overall, the web survey section is one to read.

The next section examines the set-up, participation in, and estimation from probability-based panels of willing respondents, called “access panels” in the volume – the German PPSM Access Panel (Engel, Chapter 18), the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences panel (LISS; Scherpenzeel, Chapter 19), and the Microcensus access panel for the German Federal Statistical Office (Rendtel and Amarov, Chapter 20). Chapter 21 focuses on estimation and weighting for a variety of estimates calculated from access panels (Enderle and Munnich, Chapter 21). With a growing number of access panels being developed in the US (e.g., NORC’s AmeriSpeak panel (<https://www.amerispeak.org/>), Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel (<http://www.pewresearch.org/methodology/u-s-survey-research/american-trends-panel/>)) and elsewhere, the insights from these chapters are practical and informative for many researchers who are setting up their own panels or who use a probability-based access panel.

Section VI provides overview chapters about the future of survey research, with data linkage to administrative records (Schnell, Chapter 23), data collected by observers, environmental, or biological measurements (Schnell, Chapter 24), and data about the survey data collection process, also known as paradata (Kreuter, Chapter 25). These chapters do not provide new empirical findings, but can be a quick read for a graduate student or researcher wanting a description and initial set of references for research in these areas.

Nonresponse is the focus of Section VII. Lynn (Chapter 27) argues that the wealth of data collected in earlier waves of longitudinal surveys should be used to specifically tailor recruitment protocol features in later waves of longitudinal surveys to increase response rates and potentially reduce nonresponse bias, providing four brief examples from studies in the United Kingdom. Göritz (Chapter 28) provides a handy summary of existing meta-analyses of incentive experiments, with an extended discussion of the effectiveness of different types of incentives in web surveys. A particularly interesting finding in this

review is that offering participants results from the study had no effect or *decreased* response rates relative to no incentive. Stoop's (Chapter 29) discussion of the European Social Survey (ESS) is a nice summary of the extensive work done on the ESS for researchers who do not have time to read the more extensive volumes (e.g., [Stoop et al. 2010](#)). Overall, these chapters, and especially the contributions by Lynn and Göritz, provide interesting insights into different factors related to ways to increase participation rates in different types of surveys.

The final section of the book focuses on missing data, with a particular focus on multiple imputation. The applications of multiple imputation to split questionnaire designs and matrix sampling (Bahrami et al., Chapter 31) and zero-inflated and multilevel count data (Kleinke and Reinecke, Chapter 32) are practical solutions to common data issues encountered by analysts. De Jong and Spiess (Chapter 33) provide a new semiparametric imputation model in the most statistically technical chapter of the volume. These chapters will appeal to the more statistically oriented readers, although their findings and approaches could be used by many scholars as they become implemented in software packages.

As with all edited volumes, different chapters in this book have different audiences. Some are new empirical findings, while others are overviews of existing literature. The preface (pp. xi-xii) describes the volume as arising from a series of conferences. It is a valuable resource for researchers who were not able to attend these meetings, and for understanding some of the innovations occurring in methods in Germany and beyond.

References

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- Tourangeau, R. and T. Yan. 2007. "Sensitive Questions in Surveys." *Psychological Bulletin* 133: 859–883. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.133.5.859>.