Suppose You Gave a Survey and Everyone Came[1]

Danching Ruan
Universicy of California-Irvine

Xinyuan Dai
University of Chicago

Wenhong Zhang
Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences

Yuvkang Pan
Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences

Linton C. Freeman
University of Califomia-lrvine

In the spring of 1993, we conducted a survey of personal social networks in the city of Tianj in, China. InChina, one cannot simply send out interviewers to neighborhoods; a citywide survey requires the cooperation of some city agency. Our Tianjin survey, therefore, was conducted by the Tianjin Housing Bureau under the supervision of the two present authors who are sociologists at the Tianjin Academy of Social Science. All interviews were face-to-face and were conducted in the evening at respondents' homes. A typical interview took between one-and-a-half and two hours.

Despite this long interview schedule, our response rate was enormously high. We sent out 1110 questionnaires and 1080 were completed and returned. Of these, 16 were really refusals; they were completed by substitute respondents. But we had 1064, or nearly 96%, of our interviews completed with respondents who were drawn in the original survey sample.

This response rate is way above the rate expected in surveys in the United States. In the United States something between 60% and 80% is typical of response rates in face-to-face surveys; in fact, the most recent GSS survey broke 80% for the first time in its 20-year history.[2]

This high response rate, however, is not unusual for surveys conducted in Chinese cities in recent years. The purpose of this note is to speculate about some of the reasons that the Chinese rate is generally so high and why it was particularly so in our survey.

The prinncipal reason for the generally high response rate of Chinese as, compared to Americans, is, that both academic and commercial sucveys are still quite new to China (they were unheard of before the 1980s). Compared to Westerners, then, the Chinese have not yet had enough exposure to surveys to exhibit the kind of "bum out" so often seen in the United States..

A second major factor probably reflects a cultural difference. Unlike many Americans, most Chinese do not feel strongly about individual rights. Chinese respondents seem not to believe that they have the right simply to say "no." They seem to find it difficult to turn an interviewer away from their door—particularly if that interviewer represents a government agency.

This lack of individualism also encourages interviewers to use leverage to persuade subjects to cooperate. Chinese interviewers appear to believe that a high refusal rate is a sign that they are not doing a good job. That being the case, interviewers typically feel free to push; they are comfortable asking subjects to cooperate for the sake of the city or the country and so on.

Another factor might be the result of the fiact that our survey was conducted by the Housing Bureau. Since crowding in housing is currently a big problem in Tianjin—as it is in all the major Chinese cities—respondents might have been willing to cooperate in the hope that they might contribute to its solution.

It should be pointed out, however, that people's cooperation was not simply pro forma response motivated by their fear of government retaliation. Indeed, we have evidence that our respondents took the questions quite seriously. Forexample, many respondents refused to answer the question; "Suppose you need to borrow a large sum of money. Whom would you ask?" The typical response here was "I do not borrow money from others." When the interviewer suggested that this could be a hypothetical situation, the answer often was to the effect that "I simply would not spend money if I d id not have any."

Finally, our response rate may have been enhanced by the fact that each interview began with the presentation of asmall gift (a leatherette tote bag) by the interviewer to the respondent. But, whatever the reasons for our high response rate, it is clear that any survey that seeks to tap into fundamental human responses could profitably be done in China. Surveys there are inexpensive to mount and response rates are very high.

Notes

1. This study was supported by the Henry Luce Foundation and by the Tianj in Academy of Social Sciences.

2. Personal communication with Tom Smith, director of the General Social Survey.