

**Doing Social Research in Singapore: Survey Fieldwork and Panel Studies  
29 November 2013**

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Within its first month of establishment at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), the IPS Social Lab held its inaugural workshop, entitled “Doing Social Research in Singapore: Survey Fieldwork and Panel Studies” on 29 November 2013. The event was organised in collaboration with the Social Science and Policy (SSP) cluster, the latest addition to a total of eight research clusters under the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore (NUS).

The workshop sought to increase awareness amongst various stakeholders regarding factors affecting the process of data collection. The event saw a full house of over 100 people who were keen to partake in a rare coming together of market research practitioners and academics as speakers on a single platform. They included representatives of numerous ministries as well as civic organisations such as the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre and the Asian Women’s Welfare Association, amongst others.

The half-day workshop featured two sessions, one moderated by the Head of IPS Social Lab, Associate Professor (A/P) Tan Ern Ser, and the other by its Deputy Head, Dr Leong Chan-Hoong. The first panel saw three veterans from local survey research companies present on the challenges of survey fieldwork while the second had an academic line-up of four established scholars across the fields of sociology, medicine, social work and economics, who shared their experiences about panel studies.

A/P Tan set the tone of the workshop with his opening remarks on how crucial it is to understand and meet the challenges of a field that is not considered “sexy”. First presenter Mr Andrew Lau, Vice President (Business Development) at Media Research Consultants, described the dilemma of meeting client demands in a timely manner while allowing sufficient due process to ensure the most accurate results. There is no such thing as the elimination of bias in data, Mr Lau said, but only the possibility of reducing it. He went on to provide numerous examples to assert the

importance of sensitivity to location, income bracket, ethnicity, gender and language, amongst other factors, in determining the type of methodology that would work most effectively to elicit a response from the target group.



***IPS Social Lab Head, A/P Tan Ern Ser and Deputy Head, Dr Leong Chan-Hoong (second from left and centre), with Panel 1 speakers (from left to right) Mr Andrew Lau, Mr Alan Tay and Ms Sharon Kok***

He also explained how critical it is to not only provide incentives to sustain the interest of respondents but also to tailor them to satisfy different types of respondents. Such appreciation is particularly important in long-term projects like panel studies, as was affirmed by Professor Yeung Wei-Jun Jean from the NUS Department of Sociology, in her in-depth account as co-principal investigator of the long-running US Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID).

Another point raised by Mr Lau related to the oft-overlooked subtleties of a field interviewer's presentation. He stated that reinforcing the NUS brand, for instance, through the lamination of newspaper advertisements publicising the survey, lends credibility and professionalism to the surveyor's image. By extension, these qualities secure the respondents' trust in both the veracity of the enterprise as well as the meaningfulness of their contribution to the eventual betterment of society — the latter, according to Prof. Yeung, being the ultimate incentive to ensure a consistently high response rate.

Mr Alan Tay, Managing Director of Joshua Research Consultants, discussed the vulnerability of the field of survey research in the context of the uncertain global economy. He cited various hardships facing what he called a "high-stress industry", including cost containment and the scaling down of survey operations, as well as the restructuring of companies that lead to outsourcing and in turn, complications to the management of quality control. Mr Tay stressed the need for greater investment in training facilities that would deepen the skill sets of survey research staff beyond a basic level of understanding.

Giving the audience a taste of the survey tools at hand, Ms Sharon Kok, Lead Consultant at Degree Census Consultancy, closed the first panel with a comparative chart of the advantages and limits of computer-assisted methods of interviewing against conventional face-to-face approach alongside use of the telephone and web. Ms Kok concluded that a mixed-method approach with a combination of the three styles should be strategically determined in accordance with the requirements and restrictions of the study.

Following that, Prof. Yeung gave a detailed coverage of the PSID, where she shared her experiences on the study and outlined the study's academic and policy impact over the years.

Next, A/P Koh Woon-Puay of the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School distinguished between cohort studies and panel studies with case study examples on the incidence of cancer among a pre-determined sample of patients. She explained that cohort studies are more common in medical research, where the purpose is not akin to a panel study's intent of observing social trends but focused instead on establishing associations between exposure and outcome. A/P Koh also broached the complexities of maintaining contact with respondents over time, where she suggested the utility in linkages with the Ministry of Home Affairs and the death registry at the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority, in order to track possible shifts in residence and the passing of some respondents, especially the elderly.

Prof. Paul Cheung, from the Department of Social Work, centred his presentation on the validity of traditional, or by his description, “granddaddy”, research designs in the present age of “big” (or abundant) data. While he concluded that the classic approach remains a benchmark, he also noted that researchers must manage the dynamics and wealth of information available today with the more effective model of structural inference, as opposed



***A/P Koh Woon-Puay responding to a member of the audience during her panel discussion***

to the statistical inference technique. The former routinely uses iterative analysis to revert to the population concerned in order to account for changes. This way, the

representativeness of the data is ensured, making it more accurate than an outcome derived from an unrealistically static figure.

Acknowledging that panel studies are the “gold standard” in social science research Prof. Cheung nonetheless questioned the costliness of such projects in the current climate. Despite the usefulness of panel studies in facilitating an understanding of the direction and causes of changes in individual and family traits over time, he proposed that databases could be an adequate replacement to manage the records of certain fixed attributes in a given study. He stressed that it should be the topic and purpose that drive the research methods, rather than the other way around. His closing thoughts on future research designs suggested a growing influence by open-data policy; he observed a shift away from panel studies by government agencies due to the practical constraints of funds and time.

The final speaker of the workshop was A/P Tilak Abeysinghe, from the Department of Economics, who focused on applying panel methods in non-panel settings. He showed how the crucial omission of a variable bias by inserting it into a panel study equation could diametrically alter findings such as, the spurious correlation between increasing beer taxes leading to a rise in fatality rates. A/P Abeysinghe also shared his application of panel methods to determine how the stress of exposure to the Chinese Cultural Revolution is linked to greater and possibly cancerous health risks faced by individuals born in the 1950s.

The Question & Answer (Q&A) segment raised a variety of concerns, some of which were: how to reach out to less accessible groups such as migrant workers who do not own landlines; how to gauge the reliability of one’s data; how the PSID has managed to sustain such a high response rate; how to distinguish between definite causality and just a correlation; and, how sensitive interview questions should be put across to respondents. This wide array of questions prompted valuable insight as the presenters shared further details based on their expertise.



*A member of the audience addressing the panel during the Q&A segment*

Ultimately, as Mr Tay conceded, there is no guarantee of absolute reliability in data, but just the nearest approximation using the best practices and most stringent methods available.

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