Blaise 5

Why we still need surveys for primary observation

As response rates diminish, primary observation is coming under increasing pressure. This has led to an on-going quest for alternative sources such as big data and secondary data sources.

Nevertheless, primary questionnaire-based observation still has a number of specific advantages when used alongside other sources. For example:

- Correcting for selectivity: in many cases big data covers only part of the population. Primary observation can complement it by focusing on groups that are difficult to observe, for example.
- The reason why people act in a certain way is not always apparent from big data, and explanations for certain behaviour are not always reflected in registers. This kind of additional information can be collected with the aid of primary observation. Phenomenon-based publication, i.e. publication of statistics in a wider context, relies on this 'enriching' information.
- Sentiment, perceptions, intentions and attitudes are usually difficult to measure through big data. Not all feelings are shared on the internet and not everybody goes online to share their feelings.
- Primary observation can serve as a quality check for registers, and big data needs a reference value: a gold standard. Primary observation is often used as the reference because it results in a reliable estimation of reality.
- Results of primary observation can be linked to registers with background characteristics. This enables breakdowns into detailed target groups. Better registers mean more specific samples, so that certain target groups can be extracted more efficiently (e.g. an accurate register of education levels makes it easier to approach graduates).
- Variables in registers often only approximate a survey question. Questionnaires can be used to ask what you want to investigate, and registers can be used to ask the right people.

Here are some concrete examples of surveys conducted at Statistics Netherlands in which one or more of the above points play a role:

- *Labour Force Survey:* one of the purposes of this survey is to measure unemployment. Although there is a jobseekers register, it does not include all jobseekers. Primary observation also gives information about unemployed people not in the register and the reasons why they are not registered.
- In principle, the *Key Register of Persons* contains all persons resident in the Netherlands. The quality of this register can be checked with the aid of primary observation.
- *Security Monitor:* although crime records are available, there is no registration of how safe people feel. Attempts have been made to measure perceived security using big data, but this

was only successful for some aspects of these feelings. Primary observation is necessary to measure how safe people feel.

- In the *Mobility survey*, traffic loop data can be used to measure the number of vehicles on certain roads, but this does not give any further insight into where journeys start or end and why they are undertaken.
- *Health survey*: although the number of GP and hospital consultations and medicine use can be measured though registrations, these do not necessarily correlate with how healthy people feel. In addition, primary surveys also observe physical limitations and lifestyle components.
- *Informal care*: under certain conditions, informal care is tax deductible. However, this is not the case for everybody. Primary observation can be used to supplement the available register information.
- *School-leavers survey:* this survey examines the transition from school to work. Drawing specific samples from the education register and combining them with primary observation makes it possible to study specific groups. Without primary observation, it would be difficult to determine the job-seeking activities of school-leavers.
- *Adult Education Survey*: this survey charts all possible types of education and informal learning, along with aspects of access (and experienced obstacles) to further education. Primary observation of a sample from the register makes it easier to link results and background characteristics. Moreover, a simple registration of courses and education undertaken provides no information on why a person did or did not take a certain course.
- *ICT use by households and persons*: certain groups in the population do not use the internet or social media, or use them only sparingly. Older people, for example. As a result, these groups may be underrepresented in big data sources. Primary observation can supplement the information collected from big data about these groups. In addition, certain reasons for not using the internet can be examined, for example reasons for not shopping online because of concerns about security and privacy.
- *Social cohesion and welfare:* the broad definition of welfare is high on the Dutch political agenda. Although the income register measures a certain aspect of welfare, it does not reveal how satisfied people are with life in general and with various aspects thereof. Primary observation can play an important part in this respect.
- *Sentiment survey*: this survey aims to measure opinions about and attitudes towards social issues such as pensions and pension funding, and health care and health care costs. In 2015 young people were asked for their opinions on alcohol use (e.g. do they think their drinking habits are bad for their health), social media (e.g. do they think using social media has an impact on their school achievements, and if so, what impact) etc. They were also asked about their well-being.