Survey fatigue and the tragedy of the commons: Are we undermining our evaluation practice?

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The arrival of low-cost online and automated survey technologies has substantially increased the possibilities for gathering data on people's views and experiences. In the face of COVID-19, this has enabled continued outreach to people at a time when face-to-face surveys are often impossible. Yet the enhanced opportunity for gathering data also brings with it the danger of its over-use, and with it, the onset of survey fatigue.

In this piece, I discuss the challenges of survey fatigue, and I ask if we are treating people's patience and trust in research processes as a limitless resource, when in fact goodwill has its limits. Parallels are drawn between survey fatigue and the concept of the "tragedy of the commons", in which systems of exploitation ultimately undermine their own viability. Finally, I explore possible responses, and our obligations to exercise our evaluative practice with due care for research participants, and the sustainability of our profession.

Introduction

The advent of online survey technology and automated telephone surveys has opened up a vast new capacity for seeking people's views and experiences. Such surveys are low cost and easy to administer, and a far cry from the costs of door-to-door interviewing and computer-assisted telephone interviewing. In the light of COVID-19, these have provided a viable platform for reaching people, and providing insights, when face-to-face approaches are simply not possible. Furthermore, in the midst of COVID-19 lockdowns, when in-person research was suspended (StatsNZ, 2020), online and telephone surveys are the only viable options.

In this piece, I ask if, despite the opportunities of online technology, we are creating the conditions for undermining our own work as evaluators, by over-using surveys to the extent that they undermine people's patience and trust in research processes. Are we, in effect, creating a "tragedy of the commons" by treating people's goodwill towards research and evaluation as an infinite resource, when goodwill has its limits? And, finally, I ask what options we have as evaluators to curb our enthusiasm for surveys, and strengthen trust and confidence in our activities?

I am writing this piece at a time when I am very conscious of my own practice in online surveys. Having administered three surveys in 2020 alone on the experiences of COVID-19, I sense that perhaps never have people's thoughts and reflections been more accessible. Yet at the same time we have a clear obligation as evaluators to discharge our practice in a way that is both appropriate and ethical for the purposes intended, and sustains and supports future evaluation practice.

What is survey fatigue?

Survey fatigue is a common description of over-exposure to the survey process, in which "people become overwhelmed by the number of

surveys they encounter in daily life and that they thus become fatigued" (Karlberg, 2015, p. 2). This reduces people's interest or enthusiasm to take part in future surveys, or even to complete the survey at the time (Karlberg, 2015; Porter et al., 2004). This increases the risk of obtaining incomplete data, as it may become more commonplace for users to discontinue study participation in the middle of a survey, or withdraw from an ongoing study (O'Reilly-Shah, 2017). In turn, this increases the risk of skewing data towards more engaged participants.

Declines in response rates in population-based studies are being reported internationally (Karlberg, 2015; Massey & Tourangeau, 2013). One such example from the US is a substantial decline in the response rates of households that complete an interview in a typical telephone survey, from 36% in 1997 to 9% in 2012 (Karlberg, 2015). There is some evidence to suggest a range of ways in which survey fatigue can come about: exposure to multiple surveys in one year can significantly suppress survey responses in subsequent years; the prospect of being surveyed again similarly reduces participation. Time concerns, specifically length of surveys, are a common driver of survey fatigue, and which can be moderated by salience or relevance of content to participants. Panel surveys appear particularly prone to survey fatigue (Porter et al., 2004).

There are also technological drivers of survey fatigue. Until the advent of platforms such as Survey Monkey, Qualtrics, and Survey Gizmo, surveys were often a high cost/time investment, requiring teams of people for in-person or telephone interviewing, data entry, analysis, and reporting. The broad access that modern platforms provide enables anyone with a subscription, and minimal skills, to design and distribute a survey, and to analyse immediately (Karlberg, 2015). Yet that ubiquitous access to surveys can also increase the sense of fatigue with their engagement. Fatigue may well be exacerbated by the problem that ease of accessibility does not guarantee that these tools will be

used well. All too often we see surveys that are poorly designed and deployed, and widespread accessibility of survey technology inevitably increases the opportunity for poor techniques such as leading or biased questions, vague questions, lack of pretesting or pilots, or excessively long surveys (for a useful list of poor survey techniques, a good starting point is Sullivan & Artino, 2017). These practices increase the likelihood of unreliable or invalid data, and they also undermine the work of people who conduct surveys as an integral part of their work.

Other factors include changes in working patterns, in that increased working from home can create a sense of erosion of personal or out-of-work time, and surveys can be seen as an intrusion into their few remaining hours of leisure time (Massey & Tourangeau, 2013). A further factor may be spatial bias—that some areas are more prone to being researched because of the particular features of their populations, and thereby create resistance to research occurring (Neal et al., 2016). It is clear, then, that there is a range of factors that are creating survey fatigue, but what implications do they have for our evaluation practice and profession?

The tragedy of the commons and survey fatigue

My personal interest in this issue arose from a simple bank transaction one day, when I deposited a cheque and received an email the next day asking for feedback on the service received—for a transaction that took no more than 2 minutes. When I contacted the bank to suggest that this was perhaps over-using surveys as a feedback tool, I was advised simply not to complete the survey. As a researcher I was surprised to be advised not to complete a survey by the organisation distributing it. I proceeded to monitor the number of surveys received and over the next 2 months found that I was being invited in different forms every 2 to 3 days to provide feedback, including online surveys, phone app feedback, and single question rating

machines. Commercial surveys accounted for around half of all surveys, but also a range of government and not-for-profit sources. The average completion time was 4 minutes. All this made me wonder if, as surveys are becoming increasingly ubiquitous, they are also being increasingly less valued by their intended users.

It occurred to me that there may be parallels with the "tragedy of the commons" theory, popularised by Garret Hardin in the 1960s (Hardin, 1968). Hardin wrote about the challenges of over-population, and looked at resources that were held in common, such as grazing land or fish stocks. He proposed that if one person discovers a fishery, they're able to return themselves a living while the fish stocks naturally replenish. But as more and more people exploit that fishery, the stocks decline, and ultimately their living is ruined. The tragedy of this is that each individual is acting rationally in their own interests, and taking part in a system of exploitation without limit, based on an assumption that this is an infinitely renewing resource. But ultimately it destroys that which is held in common, and destroys their own livelihood. As Hardin wrote, "the oceans of the world continue to suffer from the survival of the philosophy of the commons … Professing to believe in 'the inexhaustible resources of the oceans', they bring species after species of fish and whales closer to extinction" (Hardin, 1968, p. 1245). In Aotearoa, we only have to look to the orange roughy fishery which was discovered in the 1970s. These are slow-breeding fish that live to 150 years of age and are slow-maturing because their waters are so resource poor. Within two decades the fishery was severely depleted and even with good management it will be many decades more before the populations may recover (Bryson, 2003).

So is a similar dynamic at play in how we deliver surveys? Given that survey fatigue is real, and that our exposure to surveys has grown immensely, are we relying on an infinite source of trust and goodwill from the general public, and particularly the populations with which

we often have the most concern for their wellbeing (such as Māori, and Pacific peoples in Aotearoa)? And are we undermining the long-term sustainability of our profession by the continued growth in their use? I would argue that if this source of trust and goodwill is in fact finite, then as evaluators we have an obligation to exercise our craft with due care, not only for the people taking part, but also for the sustainability of our profession.

Is a tragedy of the commons inevitable?

Unsurprisingly, a range of practical options is suggested by researchers in industry and academia to overcome survey fatigue, including the following:

· Simplifying the language so that surveys are easy to understand and complete.

· Considering the experience from the perspectives of participants, so that a survey is engaging and easy to navigate.

· Better or more flexible timing of surveys, so that they occur at times that are convenient.

· Ensuring that questions are relevant to the research, and are not repetitive or extraneous.

· Communicating value, so that participants understand why they have been asked to take part and what their participation will contribute to.

· Making surveys as brief as possible, to minimise the attrition of respondents in the course of a survey. (Davies, 2019; Gould, 2019; Stiles 2016)

These are all valid and important for us to consider but, in many respects, these are technical solutions. Returning to Hardin, he wrote that "a technical solution may be defined as one that requires only a change in the techniques of the natural sciences, demanding little

or nothing in the way of change in human values or ideas of morality" (Hardin, 1968, p. 1243). In relation to survey fatigue, these simply ask us to do surveys differently, not to rethink our practice entirely, and fail to ask the question if we should be doing surveys at all in many circumstances. Hardin's point was that to overcome the tragedy of the commons, we needed to move to a model of "mutual coercion" or regulation, so as to protect that which is held in common. Taking this from the perspective of survey fatigue, this would suggest that we need tight regulation of our profession, including the survey industry, to protect the resource of public goodwill and trust.

It is at this point that some important challenges to Hardin's theory should be considered. Elinor Ostrom, in particular, challenged the notion that the commons would inevitably be a tragedy. Rather, she found that commons could in fact thrive when they were governed by clearly defined communities with collectively agreed rules (Raworth, 2017). Ostrom explored a range of self-organised and self-governed common pool resource systems that had successfully preserved and sustained the commons (Ostrom, 1990; Wall, 2017). The key factors she highlighted were: a clearly defined community who were accessing the commons; systems for the use of the commons that are appropriate for local circumstances; an ability for people participating in the commons to participate in making and modifying rules; effective monitoring; graduated sanctions; low-cost conflict resolution; a right to organise; and working within wider systems (Wall, 2017). The importance of Ostrom's challenge is that a commons need not be a tragedy; rather, with thought and care to craft rules and institutions, a commons can be sustained. Ostrom was inspired by the principles underpinning many indigenous societies, and advocated the Iroquois "seven-generation rule" that demands our decisions focus of the impacts these will have on many generations into the future (Ostrom, 2008).

With Ostrom's outlook in mind, I believe there are many steps that we can take to preserve the common resource of public trust and goodwill in our work. As evaluators, we are a diverse community represented by our evaluation associations and societies across the globe. Similarly, social-science researchers and market researchers have their own representative organisations to foster good practice and share learning. In Aotearoa we have our evaluation competencies and standards that together provide important guidance, although not quite rules, for sustainable and culturally responsive evaluation practice, as do many of our counterparts in different sectors and countries. By continually working to grow and strengthen our presence in our professions, we can collectively strengthen the commons that we work within. By building our links with other organisations, we can strengthen the wider system in which we operate. Through our representative organisations, we can foster a commitment to delivering fit-for-purpose evaluation and research, and challenge values and practices that simply focus on selling a product or method. At a deeper level, the growth of social businesses/enterprises, impact investment models, and sustainable supply chains are all challenging the established profiteering models, and may yet usher in a new commitment to a common good.

At the level of our evaluation practice, there is a range of actions we can take to sustain the commons. We can give careful consideration of when we need to make use of surveys by critically linking criteria to data collection. As someone who has been working in active transport for some years now, I know that we'll be solving the problem of why so few children cycle to school when we see more bikes in bike racks around the country. Similarly, when Seattle's leadership wanted to know if they were becoming a more sustainable city, they looked to counting the number of salmon returning to spawn as a key indicator (Sustainable Seattle, 1999). In cases such as these, we simply don't need population surveys. We can also explore existing data sources within

programmes or services, and also look to the growing availability of open-source data to help explore evaluation and research questions. To do this we need to build capability to make good data decisions. We need to collect data based on what we value, rather than valuing simply what we can conveniently collect. This requires strengthening research and evaluation capacity, both as providers and as commissioners, so that research that answers key questions is commissioned and delivered, rather than delivering a method. It is not sufficient to train people in such tools as online surveys; we need to frame the training with a discussion of how to design research, and how to identify the data we need to answer our research questions appropriately.

More than ever with the spread of surveys, we need to reciprocate. When people give us their views, we need to ensure that we can return to them the wider findings of the study, and communicate to them how the findings are being used, and, ideally, how they have helped create change. In so doing, we can rebuild trust in the work we do.

Conclusions

I am conscious that what I am proposing here is based on a concern rather than a verifiable trend. I am looking at a range of data sources to pose the question "Are we undermining trust in our profession?" If it should transpire that trust in our profession remains robust, there still remains an imperative to continually strengthen our practice, challenge poor research design, and reciprocate the generosity that research participants show in welcoming us into their lives. And if in fact trust in our profession is being eroded, these imperatives remain, and we need to further strengthen our practice and challenge the values that erode that trust.

In the midst of the challenge of COVID-19, when we are constantly guarding ourselves and our families/whānau from an ever-present threat, as evaluators and researchers we also need to be

ever-mindful of the trust people place in us. The proverb "Nāku te rourou nāu te rourou ka ora ai te iwi—With your basket and my basket the people will live" offers us a way to mindfully share our baskets of knowledge and reciprocate in ways that can advance the common good for the work we do.

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