

The How and Why of Research

Pluck pearls of wisdom from a sea of data.

By Terrence Fernsler


***Understanding Research Methods: A Guide for the Public and Nonprofit Manager.* By Donijo Robbins. Hardcover. 288 pages. Taylor & Francis Group, LLC (tandfonline.com).**

Thinking analytically is a key aspect of nonprofit management. Research often drives decision making. Thus, it's important to understand the elements, process, and capabilities of research, from the perspective of both producer and consumer. Donijo Robbins' book is an excellent guide to research's strengths and shortcomings.

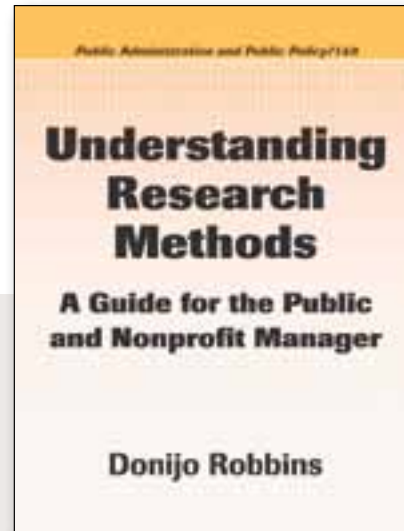
All research follows a similar process: Formulate a question, develop a research plan, collect and analyze data, and communicate findings. This book details the purpose and expectations of each step of this process. It shows how each step influences decision making when research is used to make internal and public policy. Good policy will result only when the research is reliable.

The book doesn't dwell on mathematical formulas. It's more conceptual, providing an overview of research. It reviews the research process and discusses ethical considerations. It explains common research designs, the most popular ways to collect data, and the tools used to analyze data. It offers directions on using Microsoft Excel to analyze data, because Excel is readily available to most people. Finally, it discusses effective ways to share your results.

While written for academics, it is, perhaps, best suited for practitioners, to ensure we're using relevant, meaningful data. It explains not only how to create useful research, but also how to critique the research of others. Relying on weak research studies can cripple an organization's credibility with funders, constituents, and the public. It can cause an organization to waste precious resources on programs that are ineffective.

Using good research, on the other hand, strengthens an organization's reputation — an essential nonprofit asset — and assures a more meaningful impact. *Understanding Research Methods* clarifies the difference between good and poor research and makes certain we know how to use reliable research to support our work. 

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Survey Do's and Don'ts

Surveys are an excellent way to glean helpful information. But, first, you must craft valid survey questions.

One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to assume that a question makes sense to everyone because it makes sense to you. Your questions must maintain certain criteria. Otherwise, your data will be unreliable. Take care not to violate any of these rules in writing your survey questions:

Be sure time frames are realistic. Don't ask about intentions too far in the future, as in "Do you plan to purchase a more fuel efficient vehicle in the next five years?"

Don't make assumptions. For example, "Do you drive to work?" assumes that the respondent is employed and has a car.

Use simple language. Rather than "priority," say "most important." Replace "virtually" with "nearly." And be sure the question is a complete sentence.

Ask a separate question for each concept. If the word "and" appears, you're likely asking two or more questions. For instance, "When tuition increases, are you more likely to drop out of school and look for a job?" should be made into two separate questions.

Avoid questions based on memory recall, as in "How many hours did you surf the Web last year?"

Never use double negatives, as in "Do you oppose a program that doesn't support senior citizens?"

Don't provide biased, leading information such as "We estimate that you pay 40% of your earnings each year in taxes. Do you believe this level of taxation is too high, too low, or about right?"

Get rid of subjective adjectives, such as "distinguished" or "respected." ("Do you support the efforts of our prestigious organization to provide unbiased analysis?" would be better written as "Do you support our research efforts?")