

BLM 1 – *Factors that May Influence Data*

Bias

A predisposition or bias is likely to influence a person to respond in a certain way.

Example of a biased or “loaded” question: “Do you think salmon tastes too fishy?” This person obviously has a bias against the taste of salmon and has built the presumption that the taste of salmon is unpleasant right into the question. A more appropriately phrased (neutral) question would ask what they think salmon tastes like (if answers are being recorded in a way that allows for open-ended responses) or perhaps offer different potential choices (if a closed-ended multiple-choice approach is being used).

Use of Language

A questioner’s language can affect people’s answers by influencing them.

Example (a leading question): “Do you agree that the price of salmon is way too high?” People may be led to say yes because the current phrasing suggests there is only one option really worth considering (unless one says no), that it is reasonable to expect the cost of salmon to be lower than it is, and that most people already believe salmon is overpriced. A question that asked instead whether the cost of salmon seems fair, inexpensive, or too high would encourage people to choose from three different responses without suggesting a “best” or “most popular” answer. It would be fairer and much less likely to skew results.

Ethics

The data collected must only be used for the purpose of study that respondents agree to.

Example: A study asks members of an Indigenous community for their opinions about the best methods for catching salmon. Without saying so, those conducting or supporting the study intend to use the results to develop a strategy for marketing the sale of fishing gear in the community. In this instance, the data collector should be more open and honest and inform all participants of the exact purpose of the data collection and how it will be used.

Costs/Method

When conducting research, all costs must be considered to ensure that the study is worth the work. For example, studying a small salmon stream may cost thousands of dollars and consume many hours. This investment may not be worthwhile if the purpose is purely to satisfy curiosity. It might, however, be worthwhile if the intended purpose is to guide the allocation of further resources that will improve the stream for future use.

The data collection method must also be considered. For example, when gathering community opinions, an electronic survey may seem very cost-effective. It will, however, eliminate people without access to a computer. A telephone survey might also seem appropriate; but it involves the challenge of getting listings that properly represent the community. Only those able and willing to answer will actually be counted. Similarly, a door-to-door survey may include only a certain segment of the population in your results.

Time and Timing

When the data is collected can influence results.

Example: Conducting a salmon count in a river in June will be a lot different than doing the count in November. It is essential that the reason for the data collection be assessed and then the timing of the study be decided.

Privacy

People need to have the right to refuse to participate if the topic is too personal or makes them uncomfortable.

Example: People who are pressured into participating in a study may just tell you any answer to get you to leave or they may refuse if you say you will use their name. A better option is to offer the choice of participating and disclose the purpose of the study and details regarding publication of results to ensure they have all the information and can then make an informed choice.

Cultural Sensitivity

You must take care not to offend people from different cultural groups.

Example of a culturally insensitive question: asking a First Peoples Elder why all Indigenous people love eating salmon. It may offend the Elder because you have made a generalization that all Indigenous people love salmon, and it assumes that the Elder is able to answer for all First Peoples everywhere. A less offensive option would be to ask if salmon is popular within the Elder's own community, or why salmon has played such an integral part in First Peoples history.

Summary

When designing a survey, remember to ask yourself:

- Are your questions appropriate?
- Do your questions ask what is necessary to gather the data you require?
- Do your questions take into consideration bias and sensitivity?
- Does your method for data collection seem practical?
- Have you considered cost and the time it will take?
- Did you choose a sample or a population?
- How will you display the data?
- Can you interpret your data and draw a conclusion?