

Article

Symposium 2008:
Data Collection: Challenges, Achievements and New Directions

Closing remarks

by Don Royce

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Don Royce¹

Good afternoon. As the Director General of Methodology at Statistics Canada, it is my pleasure to offer the Closing Remarks for our 24th International Methodology Symposium.

I don't know about you, but the past three days seem to have flown by very quickly. It is hard to believe that we are already at the end of another Symposium. We have had three very full days of sessions, plus a day of workshops on Tuesday. I will offer a few observations on the conference itself, but my most important task this afternoon is to recognize, on behalf of all of us, the efforts of the people who have contributed to the success of this year's Symposium. And by any measure I think it is safe to say that our 24th International Methodology Symposium has been very successful.

In support of that, I offer a few statistics: We had some 515 registrants in total, which was an increase of 28 percent over our 23rd Symposium. We had a total of 22 sessions, containing a total of 69 presentations in all over the three days. Altogether some 23 countries were represented, and over half of the papers came from outside of Canada. It was truly an international symposium, for which we are very grateful.

The response to our three workshops on Tuesday was extremely positive, with about 180 people registering. In fact the workshops were so popular that we had to close off registration early, in order to keep them to a manageable size. I would like to thank the leaders of the workshops, Roger Tourangeau of the University of Maryland, Edith de Leeuw of the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, and Jean-François Beaumont of Statistics Canada.

Then there were the Waksberg address by Mary Thompson and the keynote address by Bob Groves. Mary's presentation on international surveys showed the wide variety of issues that one is faced with in trying to conduct trans-national surveys. She showed how statistical methods can be brought to bear on these difficult and complex problems. Her Waksberg award paper will appear in the December 2008 issue of Survey Methodology. And what can I say about Bob Groves' keynote address yesterday? It captured the entire theme of the conference: Data collection challenges, achievements, and new directions. It was a stimulating exposition of a new paradigm for survey-taking. If you have not already read Bob's paper in the Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, co-authored with Steve Heeringa, please do so. I am certain that you will find it as interesting as his talk. To both Mary and Bob, thank you so much.

During the parallel sessions, we had presentations on a wide variety of topics related to data collection – organizational and management issues, questionnaire design, Web surveys, data quality, the use of paradata, administrative data and exciting new uses of informatics technology. We also had papers devoted to specific populations, such as business surveys and surveys of children, and to specific subject matters, such as health and education. My only regret and I am sure many of you felt the same, was that it just was not possible to attend all the presentations that I wanted to see.

However you will be happy to hear that we will be producing a volume of Proceedings from the Symposium, in both English and French. Conference registrants will receive a copy of the Proceedings on CD, and it will also be published on Statistics Canada's Web site. We hope to have the Proceedings available by about this time next year.

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In looking back at the Symposium as a whole, one thing in particular struck me, and that is that data collection in the future will increasingly demand a multi-disciplinary approach. We need to bring together survey operations managers, statisticians, informatics specialists, subject matter experts, and questionnaire design specialists if we are to make the kinds of advances that Bob Groves demonstrated in his talk yesterday. For statistical agencies this will require that we re-think how we are organized to support such collaboration across these disciplines. But whatever your own background, I hope that you have found something in the past three or four days that has stimulated your own thinking about how to meet the data collection challenges of the future.

Now I would like to turn to my more important task, which is to thank all of those who have contributed to the success of the symposium. First, thank you to all of the organizers, presenters and chairs of the sessions for the efforts you put into sharing your knowledge and experience with us. For those from Statistics Canada, I know that many of you contributed on top of your regular duties. You have our thanks.

For those of you from outside Statistics Canada, I would like to say how much we appreciate your willingness to respond to our invitation. Many of you have traveled a long way to be here with us this week. Thank you very much.

I would sincerely like to thank all of the people responsible for the physical arrangements that allowed the Symposium to flow smoothly. The staff of the Palais des Congrès, the staff responsible for the audiovisual equipment and the people responsible for the simultaneous translation all deserve our recognition.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of approximately 20 volunteers who have been essential to the success of this event. These volunteers have worked hard over the past few weeks so that we can relax and make the most of the Symposium. We thank you for your good work. I would, however, like to emphasize in particular the work of Denis Lemire, our volunteer work organizer. Thank you very much, Denis.

Last, and most importantly, I want to thank the Organizing Committee, which has been hard at work on this event for well over a year. It includes Yves Béland, Hélène Bérard, Paul Kelly, Danielle Lebrasseur and Carolyn Zirbser. And I want to say a special thank you to the Chair of the Organizing Committee, Mr. Chris Mohl, who has worked tirelessly to put on a fantastic Symposium this year. Please join me in showing all of them our sincere appreciation for bringing us such an excellent symposium.

Finally, I would like to remind you that next year will be our 25th International Methodology Symposium. In keeping with the theme of looking back at what we have accomplished and looking forward to the next 25 years, the title of the 2009 Symposium will be “Longitudinal Surveys: From Design to Analysis”. We also are planning some special events in honour of our 25th anniversary, so we hope you will be able to join us. For more information on the 2009 Symposium, please see the announcement in your conference package, or visit the Statistics Canada Web site and click on Workshops and Conferences.

So this brings the 24th Symposium to a close. I thank all of the participants, and to those of you from out of town, I wish you a safe journey home.