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# Survey Methods in Relationship Research

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## **Survey Methods in Relationship Research**

Survey methods are among the most popular approaches used by researchers to study human relationships. Survey methods refer to a type of research in which data are collected from a sample drawn from a population through the use of a questionnaire. Surveys entail asking questions of respondents directly, either orally or in writing. Beginning with a set of objectives, researchers using survey methods make decisions regarding the study design, the sample, the questions to be asked, and the survey mode to maximize their ability to answer research questions and minimize the cost of the study. In this entry, we review these decisions and provide examples to show how relationship researchers use surveys effectively to address important relationship topics.

### **Survey Study Design**

There are two standard survey designs that will be reviewed in this section: cross-sectional and panel. *Cross-sectional surveys* entail collecting data from a sample at a single point in time. Although researchers are not able to study change over time when using a cross-sectional design, they are able to examine the associations between variables at a given time. Cross-sectional surveys are often used by relationship researchers because they are a cost-effective way to fulfill research objectives. For example, sometimes relationship researchers are interested in knowing the association between two variables at a given time (e.g., how current level of perceived need fulfillment is associated with current level of satisfaction with a relationship). In such cases, cross-sectional designs are preferred as they provide data relevant to a researcher's hypotheses at minimal cost and effort.

However, there are many instances when researchers are interested in how a

relationship changes over time. In such instances, panel surveys are used. *Panel surveys* are a type of longitudinal study in which the same respondents are asked questions at two or more time periods. Researchers using panel surveys are able to examine how changes in one variable over time are associated with changes in another variable (or variables). Thus, panel studies may provide researchers with some insight regarding the influence of one variable on another (though it must be noted that only an experiment, properly conducted, has the possibility of yielding definitive causal information). It is also possible to examine the stability versus change of variables over time with panel surveys. Panel surveys have the disadvantage of relying on respondents to answer questions at more than one time point. Although many people are willing to participate in one cross-sectional survey, fewer are willing to commit to participating in multiple surveys without some incentive (e.g., cash payment). In addition, it can be difficult to retain people in a study if they have moved away from the original site of the investigation or if their relationship has ended or taken a negative turn. Moreover, panel survey respondents may become aware of what is being studied after participating in the initial survey and this awareness may influence their responses to subsequent surveys.

Once a study design is selected, researchers must decide from whom they will attempt to collect data by selecting a sample.

### **Survey Sample Selection**

There are two broad approaches to selecting a sample for a survey. First, one may collect data from a *probability sample*, in which each individual in the population of interest has an equal, nonzero chance of being selected. This sampling approach has many advantages. The most pronounced advantage is that findings can be generalized to

the entire population from which the sample was drawn. However, a major disadvantage is that it requires full knowledge of and access to a population, which can be quite difficult and resource-intensive. Imagine a relationship researcher who was interested in studying conflict styles in married couples around the world. In order to have a true probability sample, the researcher would have to ensure that every married couple in the world had an equal, nonzero chance of being sampled. For some research objectives, attempting to survey the entire population may be necessary (e.g., a government agency seeking definitive information on marital divorce rates over time). However, there are many instances in which research objectives do not require such generalizability, especially when theory-building is the primary goal of a study. There is a less resource-intensive option for those instances: the nonprobability sample.

A *nonprobability sample* is not randomly drawn from the population as a whole. Moreover, some members of the population have zero chance of being selected. For example, a researcher may choose to select students who are enrolled in an undergraduate course at his or her home institution as respondents. People who are not in that course have no chance of being selected to participate. This is often referred to as a convenience sample, as it is selected out of convenience to the researcher. The major limitation of using a nonprobability sample is that the results cannot be generalized to an entire population. Often researchers make the decision to use a nonprobability sample because the objective of their survey does not require a probability sample (e.g., hypothesis testing). For example, survey research by Christopher Agnew and colleagues involving a nonprobability sample of undergraduate college students found that those who reported that they were highly committed to their relationship partner also tended to think about

their relationship in more pluralistic ways (e.g., they wrote sentences about their relationship featuring a greater use of plural as opposed to singular pronouns). This finding was consistent with the researchers' hypotheses concerning how people involved in committed relationships think about their partners. Although the finding cannot be generalized to the entire population, such hypothesis testing does not require a probability sample.

### **Survey Questions**

After selecting the survey design and the sample, researchers must develop their questions. The questions may be combined to form a written questionnaire or an oral interview guide. Research objectives guide this stage of survey research, in terms of which questions to ask and in which form to ask them. A major advantage to survey studies is that all respondents may be presented with identical instructions and questions, meaning that any differences observed among answers result from actual differences in respondents. Of course, this advantage is realized only when questions are worded unambiguously and all respondents understand them. For this reason, researchers should present questions to respondents in ways that are short and simple to ensure comprehension of the questions and to minimize any fatigue respondents may feel in answering the questions. Researchers also should try to avoid jargon specific to their field (unless required and explicitly defined), so that each respondent is not put in the position of having to interpret question meaning. Fortunately, many constructs of interest to relationship researchers (such as equity, love, and commitment) can be measured reliably with scales containing questions that have been developed and validated by researchers in previous research.

In addition to selecting questions, researchers must also decide on the response options available to respondents. Some surveys feature open-ended responses, some feature closed-ended responses, and others feature both kinds. An *open-ended response* allows respondents to answer a question in their own words whereas a *closed-ended response* requires respondents to choose from pre-selected options. When delving into a new area of research, researchers often start with open-ended questions to help them get a sense of the kinds of answers that respondents generate without prompting from the researcher. One example is a study of forgiveness conducted by Jill Kearns and Frank Fincham. Out of a desire to incorporate how “regular” (or lay) people think of forgiveness with how researchers conceptualize it, Kearns and Fincham asked respondents to list what attributes they thought of when they think of “forgiveness.” From 208 respondents, 477 separate attributes of forgiveness were generated. This points to one disadvantage of open-ended responses: while they do provide a richness of information about a topic, they can be unwieldy to analyze. It is often preferred to offer closed-ended response options, particularly when a researcher is testing a specific hypothesized association between variables.

In developing closed-ended response options, researchers must decide, if using a response rating scale, which words to use as response scale anchors (e.g. “Good” – “Bad” or “Strongly Agree” – “Strongly Disagree”). Research indicates that respondents, when fatigued, not paying attention, or confused, are more likely to agree than disagree, and to say something is good rather than bad. To ensure that this does not taint data, researchers typically ask more than one question about a given construct and average the responses across a given variable. In addition, including some questions that are worded as

opposites of others (called item reversals) is standard procedure. One example of this is the commitment subscale of the Investment Model Scale (IMS), crafted by Caryl Rusbult, John Martz, and Christopher Agnew. Instead of asking one question to assess relationship commitment level, the IMS asks seven questions and averages the responses to create a measure of general commitment level. Of the seven items, five are written as positive indicators of commitment (e.g., “I want our relationship to last a very long time”), and two are item reversals (e.g., “I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end in the near future”).

An additional consideration researchers make when constructing survey questions involves attempting to control for possible response bias. For example, it may be embarrassing for a person to admit that he or she is involved in a physically abusive relationship. Whether this is due to the fact that individuals may deceive themselves and others about negative aspects of their relationships or because people prefer to respond in socially desirable ways, it is important to assess because it poses a problem for the validity of survey data. Various survey instruments, such as Timothy Loving and Christopher Agnew’s Inventory of Desirable Responding in Relationships, can be administered so that those respondents prone to answering in socially desirable ways can be identified. However, as previously discussed, additional survey questions may increase respondent fatigue which reduces the quality of responses, so additional measures should only be included if the researcher believes that the potential for socially desirable responding is high.

### **Survey Mode**

Finally, a decision must be made concerning the mode in which the survey will be

administered. The most common modes are interview and self-administered. Interviews are usually conducted on the telephone or face-to-face. Both afford the advantage of being able to probe incomplete or ambiguous answers to open-ended questions. Interviews also have the advantage of being used to collect data from populations who cannot read or write, or who may need additional explanation regarding survey questions. One disadvantage to interviews is that they can be expensive to conduct.

A less costly option is the self-administered mode, which includes paper-and-pencil surveys and online surveys. Self-administered surveys are an excellent option if the questions being asked are sensitive in nature, as respondents may be disinclined to share private information with an interviewer. Paper-and-pencil surveys can be mailed to potential respondents, but the process of mailing surveys, waiting for responses, and sending follow-up mailings can take considerable time. A newer (and generally much faster) self-administered option is the Internet survey. Internet surveys can reduce the cost of sampling a large, diverse population, and are more flexible than traditional paper-and-pencil surveys as they allow for question branching (i.e., certain questions can be asked only of some respondents depending on their previous responses). Internet surveys do not require human transcription unlike some other modes, making them potentially less error prone. However, the sample derived from an Internet survey is limited to those who have access to and use the Internet. Furthermore, Internet surveys typically have high rate of dropouts (e.g., respondents who begin a survey but do not complete it), which potentially introduces self-selection biases to the data.

### **Conclusion**

Survey methods are commonly used in human relationship research. Researchers



make decisions regarding survey design, sample, questions, and mode to maximize their ability to meet the objectives of their study and to minimize associated costs. When properly designed and executed, a survey can yield information that answers a broad range of research questions. For that reason they represent one of the most popular research methods used to study relationships.

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**See Also:**

Developmental Designs (Longitudinal, Cross-Sectional, Retrospective); Experimental Designs for Relationship Research; Peer Report Method; Qualitative Methods in Relationship Research; Quantitative Methods in Relationship Research; Questionnaires, Design and Use of, in Relationship Research.

**Further Readings:**

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