

SURVEY RESEARCH PROJECT

Soc 318, Fall 2009

The purpose of this assignment is to familiarize you with the process of conducting a questionnaire survey from start to finish. For reasons explained below, you must work with a partner on this project. Read this document carefully because your grade depends on it. *Failure to follow the guidelines for final papers will result in your paper being handed back unread.*

Research Teams

All studies will be team projects. Research teams will consist of two or three people. You may choose your partner(s) but if you have no preference, I will make the assignments. The first thing you need to do is exchange contact information and schedules, and then set up a time to meet. It is important to develop a working division of labor but also for each person to be involved in every phase of the project. As explained below, the project is divided into stages and your group must get its work approved before moving on to the next phase. Ideally all members of your group should be present during these meetings. It is your responsibility to let me or one of the preceptors know if you and your partner are having problems. At the end of the semester you may either submit one paper for your group or individual papers.

Utilizing the Preceptors

The preceptors have taken this course before so they understand what the project entails and what I expect. You will be expected to discuss your progress with them on a regular basis and they will keep a record of your meetings. Although you can get advice from anyone, for the sake of consistency it is best to work with the same person throughout the semester.

Picking a Topic

You may pick any topic you wish as long as it can be studied with a questionnaire on campus using UM students as subjects. The best topics are research questions that are interesting and feasible. You need to pick a topic that you are genuinely curious about and which can be studied adequately in the time available. Good topics are narrow in scope but still challenging.

Whatever topic you choose, your study must examine *relationships between variables*. A variable is a dimension on which people can differ, such as age, sex, income and GPA. Discovering how variables are related is a crucial step in developing explanations for social behavior.

For example, we know that kids differ in their delinquency--a few never break the law, most do occasionally, and some are chronic offenders. Delinquency is a variable that sociologists want to explain: How do the saints differ from the sinners? One explanation is the type of discipline that parents use. Maybe the saints have strict discipline at home while the sinners have little. Parental discipline (strict to weak) is another variable. If we can show that delinquency is related to the type of discipline used at home, we're on our way to understanding why some kids are more delinquent than others.

Here are some topics studied by students in previous classes. If you have trouble finding an original topic, you certainly could choose any of these that you find interesting.

- Is body piercing related to drinking, drug use, and criminal behavior?
- Does watching crime shows on TV influence one's fear of crime and distrust of strangers?

- How are the results of questionnaire surveys influenced by the way questions are worded?
- How are religious beliefs related to stealing, lying, cheating on your partner, etc.?
- Are athletes more likely to cheat than other students? Does the relationship vary by gender?
- Do students who sit in the front of the class get better grades? And if so, is it because good students prefer to sit up front, or because sitting in front actually helps one learn better?
- Are students from big cities more liberal sexually than students from small towns and rural areas?
- How is the frequency of sex related to the likelihood of having erotic dreams?
- What is the relationship between weight and self-esteem, and is that relationship different for men and women?
- How do men and women differ in their perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment?
- How do extracurricular responsibilities such as marriage and jobs influence grades?
- How are regular marijuana users different from (and similar to) occasional users and non-smokers?
- How does parenting influence delinquency?

Hypotheses

Once you have a topic, you should develop one or more hypotheses about what you expect to find. A hypothesis is a prediction about how variables are related. For example, the students who studied seating location and grades hypothesized that students who sit in the front of the room do better than those in the back. They further hypothesized that this relationship would exist even when comparing students who were equally motivated to do well in school (which is what they found).

In the social sciences hypotheses are usually based on theories. For example: The theory of differential association states that kids learn delinquent behavior by associating with other delinquents. Advocates of the theory claim that peer socialization plays a bigger role than early family experience. If the theory is correct, then I should find that UM students who were delinquent in high school had more delinquent friends than their peers who stayed out of trouble. I should also find that the onset of delinquency occurred *after* acquiring delinquent friends rather than before. If my hypotheses prove correct, then I will have more confidence in the theory.

Your hypotheses can also come from personal observations and hunches. The hypothesis about seating and grades came from two years of sitting in classrooms and noticing who got high and low grades when exams were turned back. However, even if your hypotheses are based entirely on your own experience, they may have some theoretical relevance. In any case you must be able to explain the reasoning that led to your predictions.

Review of Related Literature

A thorough literature review helps you find out what others have written about your topic. It can help you identify research questions, develop hypotheses, discover how others have studied the topic, suggest ways of measuring variables, etc. Your review doesn't have to be extensive—just *three* references, but they must be academic, social scientific books, articles, or research reports. Your references should pertain directly to your topic and hypotheses. Start looking for references as soon as you pick a topic—see chapter 10 in the textbook for tips on how to do this. In your final paper you will be expected to follow the citation format used by the American Sociological Association.

Questionnaire

Your study must be a questionnaire survey of UM students. I have several reasons for this requirement. First, the questionnaire, for better or worse, is one of the principal methods of collecting data in sociology, and you should be familiar with the problems of designing one. Second, if everyone uses the same method, your projects will be comparable in difficulty, and the potential for inconsistencies in grading will be reduced. Third, questionnaires can be administered and analyzed in a relatively short period of time. Other methods such as interviewing and naturalistic observation are more time-consuming. Fourth, the fact that questionnaires can be filled out anonymously eliminates some of the ethical problems inherent in other research methods. Finally, confining your study to UM students will both simplify data collection and reduce the chance of objections to the study from people outside the university. For many people survey research is a nuisance, and there is no point in exhausting the good will of townspeople for the sake of a class project.

When designing your questionnaire, you may want to include a few variables besides those directly related to your hypotheses. For example, if you are examining the relationship between TV viewing and fear of strangers, you might want to see how that relationship varies by gender. However, you should resist the temptation to keep adding variables as you discover interesting questions you hadn't thought of. To make sure you have time to finish what you start, your questionnaire should not be longer than two sides of one page. The questionnaire *must* look professional and be free of grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors. Once you have a clean preliminary draft, you should pretest it on a few people to catch problems you might have overlooked.

Sample

Given time constraints, the only feasible way of selecting a sample is to distribute your questionnaires in classes. This means your sample will not be a representative cross-section of UM students, but you can get some idea how good your sample is by comparing it with what is known about the student body as a whole. For example, women would be under-represented if they make up sixty percent of the student body but only a third of your sample. You should have a sample of *at least 80*. Larger samples are preferable and may be necessary depending on your topic, but remember that the more extensive your project, the more time it will take.

Start looking for places to distribute your questionnaire early. Many instructors are reluctant to give up class time, and keep in mind that other research teams are competing for the same willing instructors that you are. Try to get tentative approval even before your questionnaire is finished, and then return for the final okay. Bear in mind that the longer it will take to fill out your questionnaire, the harder it will be to find cooperative instructors. Be prepared to explain how your study meets the ethical guidelines stipulated by the IRB (see below). *Instructors must sign a form indicating that they have approved the administration of your questionnaire.* This form appears at the end of these guidelines.

Ethical Considerations

You must take steps to insure that respondents are participating freely and to protect your them from potential embarrassment or emotional upset. Anonymity is a key issue when asking questions about private thoughts and behavior, and respondents can be upset if your questions deal with sensitive issues or suggest that you are biased. All projects have been approved by the Institutional Review Board, with the following stipulations:

1. You must complete the UM online research ethics course. Go to the UM web site (www.umt.edu). Use the A-Z Index to find "Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Use of Human Subjects in Research." Then click on "Option 2" under "Human Subjects Protection

- Course.” Complete sections 1, 2, and 6. After completing each section you will receive a certificate. Give a copy of each certificate one of the TA’s, but hang on to the originals.
2. You must get written approval from the instructors whose students will be used as subjects. (Use the form at the end of these guidelines.) Take your NIH certificates with you when you contact instructors because they may want to see them.
 3. Before filling out your questionnaires respondents must be informed that:
 - a. the survey is a class project for Soc 318
 - b. questions may be asked about sensitive issues (if applicable)
 - c. they are not obligated to complete or return the questionnaire
 - d. respondents should not sign their names
 - e. for legal reasons minors are not allowed to participate
 4. Respondents must be assured of anonymity, and steps must be taken to insure that individual respondents cannot be identified.
 5. In the event that your questionnaire deals with highly sensitive issues such as child abuse or sexual assault, which might revive traumatic memories, you may be asked to include on your questionnaire a list of campus or community organizations where students may obtain professional help.
 6. Results will be reported as statistical summaries, and any quotations from written comments on questionnaires must not allow identification of individual respondents or the social clubs they belong to.
 7. Any complaints about the survey procedure must be referred to me immediately.

Steps in the Project

Your study will progress through several stages, corresponding roughly to the topics covered in class. *You must get approval before completing one step and moving on to the next.* Getting approval is not the same thing as simply checking in. You must discuss your ideas with one of the preceptors or myself and be prepared to be sent back to the drawing board. Each step has a deadline and you will be penalized for each deadline you miss. If you wait until the last minute to get approval, you run the risk of missing the deadline because the TA’s and I have limited office hours and others will be competing for our time.

1. **Partner assignments:** Exchange phone numbers, email addresses, and schedules, and pick a time to meet. Friday, Sept. 11
2. **Submit Online Ethics Self-Tutorial certificates:** Explained above under “Ethical Considerations.” *Deadline:* Friday, Sept. 11
3. **Approval of topic and tentative hypotheses:** 1) Decide what questions you want to answer with your study, 2) identify the independent and dependent variables you will need to measure, 3) develop tentative hypotheses about how the variables should be related, and 4) submit brief typed statement of hypotheses with brief explanation *Deadline:* Friday, Sept. 25
4. **Approval of literature review and finalization of hypotheses:** Submit a paragraph in your own words describing each article and how it informs your study. Be prepared to explain what you write. *Deadline:* Friday, Oct. 2
5. **Approval of measurement techniques:** Explain exactly how you will measure your variables, including 1) specific questions you will ask, 2) the response alternatives you will

provide, and 3) the method you will use to score responses. Submit in writing. *Deadline:* Friday, Oct. 16

6. **Approval of final draft of questionnaire:** Questionnaire must look professional and be free of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors. *Deadline:* Friday, Oct. 23
7. **Approval of sample:** Get written approval from instructors whose classes you will use. *Deadline:* Friday, Oct. 30
8. **Approval of plan for analyzing data:** Submit dummy (hypothetical) tables showing how you will test your hypotheses. *Deadline:* Friday, Nov. 20
8. **Submit final paper:** Details explained below. *Deadline:* Friday, Dec. 8, 5:00 pm

Final Paper

You should submit one paper for your group, although individual papers may be permissible in some cases. Even if one person writes the entire paper, each group member should 1) contribute ideas before the paper is written, and 2) read and critique a rough draft of the paper before it is submitted. Papers must follow the format for quantitative research articles in professional journals. See eres reading #1 by Mike King for an example. Reports that do not conform to the following guidelines will be returned unread:

1. Submit two copies if you would like one returned with comments.
2. Number and staple your pages. Please don't use plastic binders.
3. You must have a title page including your names, the date, and title of your paper.
4. The title page must be followed by an abstract of no more than 150 words describing your study: topic, hypotheses, methods, findings, and conclusions. Consult a professional journal for examples.
5. Your paper must be double-spaced, no more than eight pages of text. Be sure to number your pages. Tables may be included in the text or as an appendix, although in the text is preferable.
6. Your questionnaire must be included as an appendix. If it's not immediately obvious which questions on the questionnaire measure a particular variable, add notes to that effect. This is especially important when creating composite measures. For example, you could put an asterisk (*) by items measuring your independent variable and a pound sign (#) next to measures of the dependent variable.
7. Reports must include the following information.
 - a. Introduction—the question you set out to answer and (in a nutshell) how you propose to answer it.
 - b. Review of the literature that explains how these studies pertain to your own.
 - c. Statement of your hypotheses and how you arrived at them.
 - d. Explanation of how you measured your variables, with illustrations from your questionnaire. If composite measures were used, explain how they were created and scored.
 - e. Description of your sample and data collection method. Be sure to identify the classes in which your questionnaire was administered.
 - f. Description of your results, consisting of brief discussion of what each table means and whether or not it supports one of your hypotheses.

- g. Concluding section where you summarize your findings, speculate about their significance, and point out the strengths and weaknesses of your study.
- 6. Use subheadings to organize the paper. It's not necessary to label the introduction, but subsequent sections should have subheads. The number of subheads can vary. A long paper might have separate sections for the introduction, literature review, and hypotheses, but a shorter paper might use only two-- e.g., 1) an introduction that includes the hypotheses, and 2) review of literature; or 1) introduction, and 2) lit review and hypotheses.
- 7. Use your own words instead of quoting from others *unless* it is important for the reader to know the exact words. Excessive use of quotes, especially long ones, is lazy!
- 8. Tables should be clearly titled and easy to read, without unnecessary clutter and cryptic variable labels from a computer printout. Arrange your tables in a logical fashion, number them, and discuss them in order.
- 9. When creating tables, include both cell frequencies and percentages. Be sure your percentages are computed in the correct direction.
- 10. Any time you cite another work, you must provide the reference. You must use the American Sociological Association reference format. Consult a recent volume of the *American Sociological Review* for examples, or look at how references are cited in your textbook.

Grading

When grading your projects I will focus primarily on how well the study was designed and executed, and your awareness of the study's limitations. However, I also will consider the difficulty of your topic, how well you followed the project guidelines, and how well the study is explained in the final paper. I will mark off for ambiguities, incompleteness, and poor organization. Deductions may also be made for mistakes of grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc., especially if they make the paper hard to read. If you submit a group paper, each person is responsible for proofreading and editing the final product.

In most cases all members of a team will receive the same grade for the project. However, project grades may differ if it appears that one member has not made a significant contribution or has failed to grasp the methodological principles underlying the study. This applies whether you submit individual papers or one group paper. To assess your contribution, I will rely on my own observations, the TA's assessments of their meetings with you, a detailed evaluation by your partner(s), a written self-assessment, and a final exam question asking you to describe some aspect of your project. A formal evaluation of your partner(s) will be required.

I have read the questionnaire designed by _____
and approve it for use in my class _____.

Name

Department

Date to be administered

Thanks for your willingness to help. If you have any questions about this project or concerns about the questionnaire, please contact Professor Rob Balch, Sociology, x2982 or rob.balch@umontana.