

A simple guide to developing surveys

- Dr. Jens J. Hansen

PART ONE: *Some incidental notes on survey design* (Published 12/5/2008)

We've recently had an inquiry about conducting a survey. At first glance, preparing and administering a survey seems relatively easy and the answers that arise give clear pointers to the future - right?

Wrong! There's much more to it than at first appears to be the case. Here are three small considerations and there are bound to be more:

First consideration: *You have to ask all of the right questions and in the right way.* For instance, if we ask people "do you want a library?" the answer will almost inevitably be "yes". That happened for a territorial local government once in our city and so the politicians concerned felt, quite reasonably, that they had a mandate to build a library. However, they then proceeded to locate that library in what was considered by their constituents to be an out-of-the-way place. They had not asked all of the relevant questions, especially questions concerning where the citizenry might like their library to be located.

Second Consideration: *You have to be careful about how you interpret data from surveys.* For instance, in one suburb, young girls were asked about their recreational choices and horse riding featured to such an extent that it was estimated that a herd of 800 horses would be needed to satisfy overall horse-riding demands. What was missing was information about the level of commitment which those same young girls might display... The reality remains, a number of years later, that some twenty or so, pretty tired looking horses, continue to satisfy the riding needs of that suburb.

Third Consideration: *You have to be very careful about what kinds of questions you ask and to whom.* A number of years ago, whilst they were at secondary school, two of our children were asked, as successive cohorts of social studies students, to survey members of the neighbourhood about free-time pursuits. What was both tragic and fascinating was that members of our immediate neighbourhood potentially admitted to incriminating recreational behaviours. (We lived in a salubrious domain, let me tell you!) Ethical surveillance had not occurred and sadly, even though our children have now grown up, and moved on as have we, such procedures are still not in place at

that particular school, and indeed, they're not in place within most schools in New Zealand.

So what's this have to do with this news item? Well, given the fact that we were approached for some advice about surveys, we've decided to make some of our resources available for public scrutiny and possible use. We've developed a short article that delves into the vagaries of (and rants briefly about) ethics committees. In so doing, it actually dares to castigate some of what such committees do, or don't do as the case may be. (By the way, we'd be interested in any stories you have about the seemingly unreasonable antics of well intentioned ethics committees because there's a serious-cum-humorous book to be compiled about such matters.)

But notwithstanding such stories, we've made a slide show available about how to begin to think about developing a survey. It's a simple slide show that you can work through at your own pace. As they say so blithely in restaurants, enjoy!

- **PART TWO: *A simple guide to developing a survey.*** (Published before the notes above on 12/3/2008)

Being asked to complete a survey has become a relatively prominent occurrence; in fact, it's an increasingly common intrusion within the helter-skelter of contemporary daily living. Pollsters and call-centre workers inevitably seem to trill their phone interruption just as you're sitting down to a meal; faceless researchers from unknown organisations, often without invitation, send online surveys for you to complete; strangers, without hesitation, approach you in shopping malls and ask for a moment of your time to complete a survey they're administering. They're all seeking information so that they can sort and count responses in order to tell a story.

And ethics, whilst obviously important, don't always feature in survey schemata. For market researchers, there seldom appears to be any form of ethical safety net; they seemingly answer to their clients, not to research ethics committees.

For tertiary institutions, well intentioned research ethics committees frequently seem to hinder rather than promote research.¹ This happens far too often when members of research ethics committee create firewalls of access and labyrinths of compliance

¹ As a matter of interest, I've served as an external Chair of a Research Ethics Committee at a Teacher Education agency and I've also served on two other tertiary research ethics committees. Without in any way wishing to appear arrogant, the claim that a little knowledge can be a very dangerous thing indeed, seems to me to be a very apposite description when it comes to summarising such committees; they're always well intentioned but they routinely seem to take it upon themselves to be all things to all researchers – including being ultimate experts and critical commentators on research design that has already been through vigorous validation processes and countless expert-peer review-authorisation committees!

requirements which they themselves do not always seem to understand. Their demands routinely frustrate rather than assist researchers.

Indeed, by hindering the progress of contemplated research in this way, such committees actually seem to punish individuals who just want to get on with it! Their intention, purportedly, is to protect the public, and that's a valid remit. But more truthfully, they're actually intent upon mainly shielding their home institution from the possibilities of litigation. In reality, and somewhat ironically, the only litigation that might occur (and it really is a very real possibility) is a class action taken against ethics committee members by those researchers whom they so seriously and serially thwart!

But ethics committees aside, it does seem true that surveys, in particular, encroach upon our persona in one way or another. Regrettably, it seems to us, survey instruments are not always well designed. For that reason, we've determined that we would share this resource with you.

The slide show that accompanies this little *homily* on ethics (which you may have gathered is based the experiences of some of my thesis protégés, past as well as present) attempts to redress that matter. It does so by offering beginning researchers a pointer or three about some of the matters they might usefully think about if they want to get into the business of conducting a survey. The slides represent a synthesis of information derived from an amalgam of sources and a host of experiences I've had in designing surveys and analyzing responses .

It's important to point out that the slide show is not about statistics and neither is it about how to develop and administer online surveys. Instead, it is very generally about the design and management of surveys. The presentation is one that I developed a few years ago for a postgraduate research methods course I was teaching and if there is any interest in the slide show, I'll develop some accompanying notes for each individual slide. (Let me know if you want me to do that.)

To view the slide show, [click here](#) and remember, feedback about this resource is welcomed as always. Finally, as a suggestion, why not also spend some time examining the paper on approaches to understanding research. That particular paper can also be found under the heading *Research Resources*.

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