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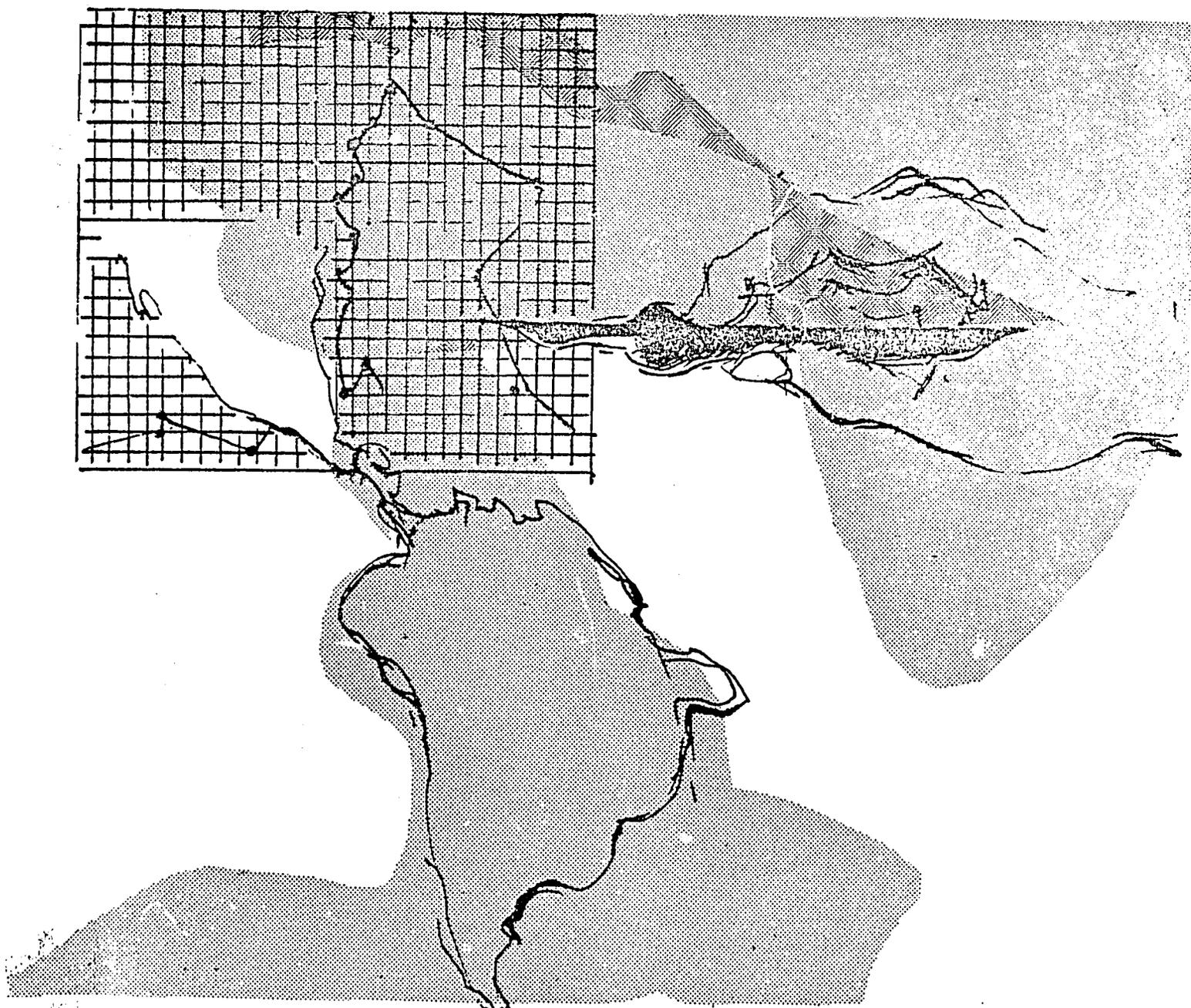
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# SOME RECURRENT ISSUES IN SURVEY RESEARCH IN LATIN AMERICA

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SOME RECURRENT ISSUES IN SURVEY RESEARCH IN  
LATIN AMERICA<sup>1/</sup>

by

A. Eugene Havens<sup>2/</sup>

The use of survey techniques has not enjoyed widespread use in psychological and other social science research in Latin America. Yet there is every reason to expect that during the next decade survey research will be a frequent tool used by social scientists in Latin America.<sup>3/</sup> The major reason this will occur is that survey research provides information that is necessary for more sophisticated research designs. For example, it is impossible to perform a before-after experimental design with matched experimental and control groups unless one has certain information about these groups to be used in matching. Information such as the age-sex structure, channels of communication, levels of knowledge, etc., are quite frequently employed as variables to be controlled by matching. Surveys can provide this type of information in a relatively efficient manner.

If these contentions are true, then it may be important to review some of the recurrent issues in survey research in the hope that by specifying them, research to be carried out in the future can avoid some of the mistakes made in the past. Such is the purpose of the present paper. As a result, many

of the topics treated herein will not represent a new contribution but rather a reappraisal of these issues.

#### ENUMERATION OF THE ISSUES

Frequently among researchers coming from different traditions of the social sciences an argument ensues concerning the validity of the data generated by surveys as opposed to direct observation. Obviously, the two techniques often give different results, not because one is necessarily more valid than the other, but because the two techniques are logically suited to answer different basic research questions. Thus, one of the central issues in survey research, and any research for that matter, is the conceptualization of the research problem. During conceptualization, two key questions emerge, what to ask and how to ask it. This is the first issue to be discussed subsequently.

Survey research, when not based upon a total enumeration of a population, must depend upon the adequacy of the sampling done. Therefore, the issue of defining the universe, presence of sampling frames, and locating the units drawn in the sample become central to the validity of the results.

Insofar as surveys are not self-administered, the recruitment and training of interviewers is another issue to be considered. Under this section will be treated concerns such as interviewer bias, difference in response depending upon

the sex and social class of the interviewer, and subtle variations in meanings.

The final two issues to be treated are concerned with the use of surveys in comparative analysis which includes the problem of conceptual equivalents versus item equivalents and comparing operationalizations as well as data. The last issue, which derives its importance from the previous one, is the question concerning whether or not the survey is a viable instrument for testing hypotheses.

These five issues, 1) conceptualization of the research problem, 2) sampling adequacy, 3) interviewer recruitment and training, 4) comparing the results of two or more surveys from different universities, and 5) the use of surveys in testing hypotheses, will be discussed in detail in the following pages.

#### The Centrality of Conceptualization

It is frequently suggested that essentially the survey is an empirical instrument that generates a large number of unrelated "facts" that at some later stage provide the raw material for theory building and conceptualization. This is simply not true for two reasons. First of all, not even survey research is conducted entirely at the empirical level. It is more than a set of empirical procedures that yield specific findings. Whether he is aware of it or not, the survey researcher does not simply enumerate all the facts and

then classifies them. His way of selecting certain facts and searching for order among them is always guided by some prior assumptions and some basic questions that he is trying to answer. Secondly, even if it were possible to "look at all the facts" without making any assumptions, this is not a necessary component of survey research. The decisions as to what to survey are certainly derivable from a research model.

Even though it may be true that more emphasis is placed upon how to ask questions rather than what questions to ask, this need not be the case. Moreover, answering the issue of what questions to ask can only be handled by conceptualization. By conceptualization, we mean the explicit statement of the assumptions being made, defining the concepts to be studied and specifying the relationships expected among these concepts. In other words, conceptualization as used herein implies the construction of a research model. Once constructed, the model not only performs the aforementioned functions, but it also serves as a standpoint and directive for the types of data to be gathered. If the survey technique can provide the types of data specified by the model, then it is an appropriate tool; if not, it should be discarded for that particular job. If this type of conceptualization is not a part of the research process, then it is difficult to determine if the survey is an appropriate instrument or not.

For example, if one views the problem of success or failure in marriage as the re-enactment of childhood roles, the survey may not be the most appropriate instrument for data gathering. On the other hand, if success or failure in marriage is thought of as a juxtaposition of sets of personality traits, the survey would be most appropriate.<sup>4/</sup> But in either case, one should first decide which view he wishes to take of marriage before he decides what data gathering instrument is most efficient.

During conceptualization and particularly definition, one must constantly be on guard for what Hook called unanalyzable abstractions.<sup>5/</sup> By this is simply meant whether or not declarations made in the research model are meaningful. As Hook stated:

When are sentences meaningful? Briefly, a sentence is meaningful if we know how to go about testing it, and what would constitute evidence tending to confirm it or refute it. If we know what would be evidence one way or another for our proposition, then we know what kind of situation to look for or construct (as the case may be)... Every statement, then, which purports to be a true account of what is so or isn't, enables us by the use of certain rules of inference to derive other statements that direct us to do certain things and to make certain observations. How, then, do we recognize that a sentence contains abstractions that are unanalyzable?...by the inability of the speaker or writer to state...the conditions or situations in which certain observations can be carried out to test it.<sup>6/</sup>

Based upon the notion of unanalyzable generalizations, one can determine whether or not the basic research questions contained in the model are subject to empirical testing. For

example, if our basic research question states "To what extent does the individual feel that he possesses personal liberty?" it does not mean anything unless it can be translated into a series of propositions such as "liberty to invest capital wherever he can get the highest return" or "liberty to organize unions."<sup>2/</sup>

Moreover, unanalyzable generalizations take on particular importance if one is attempting to use attitudinal scales in his surveys. Testing for reliability and validity assumes unidimensionality.<sup>8/</sup> Even though it is possible to test for unidimensionality, how is it possible to select test items if one is attempting to measure unanalyzable concepts or concepts that are used in unanalyzable generalizations? The answer is obvious by definition. One has no way of knowing what items to select. Yet many an attempt at scale construction has been made without rigorous conceptualization of the variables under study.

When one moves to the questions of reliability, the focus is shifted from what questions to ask to how to ask the questions.<sup>9/</sup> The answers to this issue generally center around considerations of language used in the questionnaire or survey. This can generally be treated under the headings of 1) vocabulary, 2) communication, and 3) structural meanings. Vocabulary is the problem of language that concerns itself with the level of language ability of the population under

study.<sup>10/</sup> Vocabulary errors lead to "no communication" in the sense of no shared meanings, while communication errors refer to either 1) a single term (albeit shared) may refer to different phenomena, or 2) different terms may refer to the same phenomenon.<sup>11/</sup> Thus one must select the concept appropriate for the stimulus he hopes to introduce. In other words, there must be congruence between the meaning taken for granted by the researcher and the meaning the respondent imputes to the concept as he replies. This concern immediately leads to the necessity to place most relevance upon structural meanings rather than lexical meanings. That is, "words" are not included in a survey questionnaire but actually concepts that have meaning in relation to other concepts. Since these concerns are both well-known and well-documented, they will not be given further attention in the present study.

The present section has attempted to indicate some of the recurrent problems of conceptualization and how they related to survey research. Emphasis has been placed upon the "what questions to ask" aspect rather than the "how to ask them" concern, since it is my firm conviction that in most instances the latter takes precedence over the former. Moreover, it is argued that without adequate conceptualization neither the most perfect sample nor the best trained interviewers are sufficient to make the survey technique a viable instrument for social science research.

Sampling Adequacy

Probably one of the most frequent issues in survey research is the concern with drawing samples to be surveyed that are representative of a larger universe. This is not a happen-stance event. One of the most frequent justifications for using survey techniques is that they allow the gathering of various types of data that can be generalized to larger units. Thus sampling of some sort is implied in the justification for the use of surveys. Any given study may differ widely from others, however, depending upon their objectives, in the relative emphasis placed upon representativeness of the sample studied. Market research studies or public opinion polling, for example, are designed primarily so that inferences drawn from them will describe the larger population with a known degree of accuracy. Other types of studies may sacrifice a degree of sample representativeness either because the objective is purely exploratory, or because the universe of theoretical concern is too general to allow representational sampling, or because the requirements of the particular analysis are more compelling than the need for representativeness.

Whenever sample representativeness becomes of prime concern in survey research, how the universe is defined and the establishment of sampling frames become crucial elements for consideration. The definition of the universe to be studied

is largely dependent upon the nature of the basic research questions posed in the conceptualization of the problem. For example, if one is concerned with studying the relationship by field survey techniques between anxiety and risk-taking behavior among decision-makers, then his universe must be defined as all those decision-makers in a given locality area or social category. A sampling frame for this type of universe is rarely present. Imagine attempting to sample a universe of decision-makers in farming in a Latin American community given the complexity of the land tenure arrangements one encounters.

Even opinion polling of all household units in a given geographic area does not escape difficulties. Rapid urbanization in Latin America makes almost every map of household units in urban tracts surrounding the major cities out of date before the map is completed. The problems in the rural areas are even more extreme. Random samples drawn by assigning numbers to each person in the universe and selecting at random a certain percentage of the total population to be interviewed implies two very important items: 1) knowledge of the total number of persons, and 2) the location for interviewing of those drawn in the sample. This is almost totally impossible in most rural areas of Latin America. Peru represents one of the biggest exceptions to this generalization, thanks to their excellent aerial photographing of the country. Nevertheless, locating a house on an aerial photo and

locating that same house in the field is not necessarily easy given the nature of the terrain and transportation difficulties. One possible solution to the sampling difficulties encountered in areas of rapid urbanization or in rural areas is the use of area sampling. This still requires knowledge of population distribution which is not always available.

There are several alternatives that the survey researcher may employ in solving these problems. For example, there are quite a number of non-probability sampling techniques that might be employed, or the researcher may perform a brief census of the area under study, thus allowing him to include in his conceptual universe only those individuals who fit his definition. At any event, these issues must be faced by the survey researcher.

#### Interviewer Recruitment and Training

Because the general nature of the issues involved in interviewer training and recruitment are so well known, they will not be treated in great depth in the present paper. Any beginning student of survey research is aware of the need to recruit interviewers that are conscientious in their endeavors to obtain the most complete information possible and to report it faithfully. Moreover, he is acquainted with the concern of not presenting himself as one of superior social standing during the interview situation. However, the evidence for this latter point is conflicting. Myren reports,

for example, that in Mexico he was able to obtain reliable and valid data in survey research while using upper class females to interview rural peasants.<sup>12/</sup> On the other hand, other researchers report that best results are obtained by recruiting and training interviewers who are of equal status to the respondents.<sup>13/</sup> It is quite possible that the solution to these apparent conflicting results lies in the nature and extent of training given the interviewers. Sex differences between interviewer and interviewee and the presence of third persons present in the interview situation are other potential sources of bias that must be checked.<sup>14/</sup> Most of these issues can be solved during the pre-testing phase of the research process.

One important aspect of interviewer training that is less frequently mentioned centers around detecting and recording in a systematic fashion subtle differences in responses. This is particularly relevant in attitudinal and opinion research where attention is paid to the intensity of agreement or opinion. For example, a respondent who indicates agreement with an attitudinal statement by responding, "Si, como no" must certainly vary in intensity of agreement from the one who responds to the same item with "Creo que si." One possible way to systematize these types of responses is to determine the intensity of agreement by a series of dichotomous questions. For example, if one is dealing with a response

continuum ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, he might first ask if the respondent agrees or disagrees and then ask if he is in strong agreement (disagreement) or only mild agreement.

While all of the preceding issues that have been discussed are very obvious ones, it is sometimes helpful to remind ourselves of them so as to keep them in mind. Attention is now turned to some more basic issues.

#### Surveys and Comparative Research

Probably the ultimate test of any research instrument is the extent to which it contributes to our knowledge and to theory building. Comparing research results from one setting to that of another is an essential step in theory building. To what extent can the survey be used in comparative research? The age-old problems of reliability and validity of the research instrument are central to answering this question. Not only is the reliability and validity of the instrument used in a particular research setting important, but also the reliability and validity of the comparison. For example, when discussing the validity of a test instrument in a particular setting, we are quick to point out that it is necessary to understand that behavior-relevance in a construct is not logically the same as behavior-equivalence. "It is one thing to insist that in order to be admissible, a complex psychological construct must have some relevance to

behavioral indicators; it is quite another thing to require that any admissible psychological construct must be equivalent to any direct operational behavior measure.<sup>15/</sup> By the same token, it is folly to insist that there must be a relational equivalence between study A and study B if the environmental conditions surrounding the individuals in study A are different from those in study B and unless the measurement in both cases yields similar levels of validity. For example, if alienation is found to be highly related to status inconsistency among empresarios in Lima but not found to be related among empresarios of Santiago, we can draw no inferences about the differences between these groups unless all known relevant conditions that effect alienation and its measurement are the same in both groups. Yet, survey techniques are not by nature able to exercise great control over the observations they record.

This would seem to suggest that surveys can contribute to comparative analysis if comparison was built into the research model and the survey instrument was applied under similar environmental and observational conditions. However, comparing the results of a survey performed for one purpose with those of another performed by a different researcher with, perhaps, entirely different goals in mind is likely to yield disappointing results. In the first place, it is doubtful if external variables that might effect the response were

controlled similarly, if at all. Moreover, it is essential that the comparison be made not only between the results but also between operational definitions employed by both researchers.<sup>16/</sup>

Even if comparison is built into the research design and survey techniques are employed, all the problems do not disappear. They merely take a different form. The most crucial problem in this type of design centers around the problems of language mentioned earlier, even if the research is performed within the same language group. It seems to be a generally accepted premise that meanings do not exist in words but rather in the subject's relation to these word stimuli. Of course, this problem is paramount if one is engaged in cross-cultural research. When indigenous research is considered, these problems are less since the researcher, knowing his language as only a native can, tends to select the appropriate concept for the stimulus he hopes to introduce. Nevertheless, these considerations have profound implications for cross-cultural research, especially in those circumstances where translation is required. Expressed in terms of methodology, transposing an item across languages by the means of a formal translation can result in a shift of stimuli between the scales. Comparing the results of such scales is not possible. Thus, translations cannot be made in terms of words but must be made by substituting terms which hold

stimuli constant across cultures, which is not always accomplished by a formal translation.

#### The Use of Surveys in Testing Hypotheses

The last issue, "Is the survey an appropriate instrument for testing hypotheses?" will be treated only briefly. Immediately, one must respond that the answer to this question depends upon the types of hypotheses to be tested. If one is interested in testing hypotheses that specify probability relationships between two or more concepts, then the survey is a viable instrument for this purpose. It will produce a set of empirical generalizations. But it will never replace more sophisticated designs such as laboratory or field experiments. On the other hand, the types of information that surveys do produce may be necessary information that allows one to move to more sophisticated designs. In brief, it has its place in the growth of a science, but it isn't science in and of itself.

#### CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is the contention of the present paper that survey research techniques will be widely used throughout Latin America in psychological and other social science research during the next decade. After that, they will gradually give way to more sophisticated research techniques but will not be totally displaced. The reason that survey

research will be so prominent for the next few years is that surveys yield a type of information that is necessary for the growth of a social science but not sufficient to establish any social science as a science. For example, insofar as we are not allowed total freedom in experimenting with human beings, large samples from surveys allow statistical controls on items which would not be amenable to manipulation in an experimental design. And this type of information may be crucial to the sharpening and reformulation of theories concerning human behavior.

Based upon these assumptions, the present paper outlined some of the most frequently recurring issues in survey research in the hope that by reviewing the issues the first tentative step is being taken toward making explicit the proper role of survey research techniques. Almost all of the issues explored are directly related to the nature of the research problem and how it is conceptualized. Thus, conceptualization is viewed as the key issue in survey research as in any research problem.

FOOTNOTES

1/ The present paper was prepared for the Meetings of the Interamerican Psychology Congress in Lima, Peru, April 3-7, 1966. The author is indebted to the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin for travel funds.

2/ Assistant Professor of Rural Sociology and the Land Tenure Center, University of Wisconsin. The views presented herein are those of the author and not necessarily of the above mentioned entities.

3/ For a lengthy treatment of this point, see A. Eugene Havens and others, Medición en Sociología: Conceptos y Métodos (Bogotá: Facultad de Sociología, 1965).

4/ See Matilda Riley, Sociological Research (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), p. 5.

5/ Sidney Hook, Reason, Social Myths and Democracy (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), pp. 14-21.

6/ Ibid., pp. 13-15.

7/ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

8/ Havens and others, op. cit., Chap. III.

9/ American Psychological Association, "Technical Recommendations for Psychological Tests," Psychological Bulletin (Supplement), 1954.

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