CHAPTER 4

Surveys

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Surveys are widely used in contemporary society to know, govern, and serve populations, from censuses and public opinion polls to clinical trials and consumer experience studies. They are, however, far less common when it comes to unpacking global governance and the critical role individuals play in determining IO action at different levels. With handbooks on survey research abound, this contribution draws from ongoing research on aid workers to situate the interest and intricacies of doing survey-based research on IO professionals.

What?

Historically, surveys emerged as an instrument of government (Desrosières 2010), first used by nascent state administrations and then social reformers (Converse 1987). From the 1930s onwards, surveys made their way into scientific practice, notably in the social and medical sciences.

Though commonly reduced to its initial definition as a quantitative research tool adept in the "systematic" collection of a large quantity of information on a "sample" of individuals, surveys have been subject to methodological pluralization. This is best evidenced in their adaptation in mixed methods and experimental approaches. Putting aside discrepancies in *how* it is used, survey research rests on two key premises. The first assumes that the characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and past experiences of individuals can be analyzed through the administration of well-formulated questions (de Leeuw, Hox, and Dillman 2008). The second premise is that findings resulting from the study of a representative population are generalizable to the identified population as a whole, thereby making sampling so important.

In IO studies, the use of surveys is fairly recent and rather rare. In addition to the general difficulty of administering a survey, this absence may be explained by the fact that IR scholars rarely put the individuals who represent (i.e., delegates) or work for IOs (i.e., secretariat staff, consultants, civil society or private sector partners) center stage. As a result, we lack a macro-perspective on the trajectories, attitudes, interests, and practices of individuals who make IO action possible.

Why?

Echoing emergent calls to bring professionals into the study of IOs and global governance fields (Kauppi and Madsen 2013; Seabrooke and Henriksen 2017), we find surveys particularly useful in answering three sets of questions. Moreover, once built, survey-based datasets can then be disseminated among researchers, either to make comparisons across populations or address new research puzzles.

Q1: What characteristics define IO professionals as a population?

Professionals, understood broadly as individuals who earn a living from their activities, are central protagonists in all forms of IO action, from diplomatic encounters to the design, implementation, and evaluation of international public policies. Though UN diplomatic and elite bureaucratic staff have received some attention in recent years,[1] IO professionals remain relatively understudied as a population. Capturing diversity and hierarchy within IO professional ranks, a survey can provide a macro-level description of an organization's workforce—the scope of which depends on sampling. Though not exhaustive, possible variables include: (1) personal information (i.e., nationality, age, civil status); (2) socioeconomic status (i.e., income, education, occupation); (3) professional experience (i.e., previous jobs, contractual status, job satisfaction); and (4) ideational values and preferences (i.e., economic/political/religious/moral attitudes). Additionally, datasets can be compared and contrasted to assess the (non)specificity of IO professionals in relation to other populations. For example, to understand the social

1. Most recently, see for example Pouliot (2016) and Yi-Chong and Weller (2018).

construction of international peacebuilding, Goetze (2017) used web-based survey (WBS) methods to describe the experiences, professional trajectories, political values, and working environments of UN peacebuilders.

Q2: How are socio-professional hierarchies within IOs structured?

Building from descriptive data on IO professionals belonging to different hierarchical grades, surveys can be used to shed light on socio-professional hierarchies in IOs. By collecting data on professional mobility and status alongside socioeconomic indicators, we are able to map status and inequality in relation to social class, gender, nationality, profession, organizational loyalty, and so forth. Survey data reveal what resources are necessary to succeed, professionally, in an IO setting. Hierarchical grades can potentially be analyzed in relation to conflicts of interest, as in the case of Mele, Anderfuhren-Biget, and Varone's (2015) study on what determines whether international civil servants defend the national interest of their country of origin or the international interests of the IOs they work for.

Q3: How do IO professionals' preferences and attitudes help explain international public policy dynamics?

The intensified pace of globalization has led global governance to adapt, both in the norms and policies it produces and the way governance is practiced, to meet challenges raised by the increased interconnectedness of economies and societies. Could some policy shifts and/or policy inertia be explained by individual or collectively shared preferences? In giving heed to the subjectivities of IO professionals, a survey can build a transversal connection between the individual, the organizational, and the systemic level. Analyzing survey data on employee job satisfaction from an organizational management perspective, Giauque, Anderfuhreng-Biget, and Varone (2016) have, for example, shown how individual perceptions of stress and turnover intentions can potentially impact IO performance.

How?

To give a brief overview of how to conduct survey-based research, we address five major considerations.

Selecting, Wording, and Ordering Survey Questions

Overall, a good survey proposes a limited number of coherently formulated and structured questions. Three issues deserve particular attention: how to select, how to word, and how to order questions.

Choosing which questions to include in a survey depends on the core research focus. Based on our research objectives, our questionnaire incorporates two main types of questions: 1) questions specific to the humanitarian field—i.e., *What is your main motivation for working in the humanitarian sector? How many years have you worked in the humanitarian sector?*; and 2) general questions about participants' socioeconomic status, beliefs, and values—i.e., *How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?*. Regarding the latter, we have drawn questions from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the European Values Study (EVS), both recognized for their scientific rigor—a strategy also deployed by Goetze (2017). Within both surveys, we sampled questions with a demonstrated predictive and convergent validity over time, meaning they were replicated several times from 1981 to 2008 to control for survey-related biases such as social desirability[2] or recall bias.[3]

In terms of wording, open-ended and closed-ended questions ideally need to be balanced, unless survey research is coupled with, for example, qualitative interviews, thereby reducing the need of open questions. Closed-ended questions are easier to analyze but may come off as irrelevant or oversimplified to a respondent. One way of overcoming this difficulty is to build on other surveys and organize a survey test run before officially administering it.

Finally, question order is of critical importance in designing a survey as preceding questions have been found to have a strong influence on answers given to subsequent ones. The first section is composed of icebreaking questions that allow respondents to smoothly enter into the survey's topic. Starting with descriptive questions about the respondent's current position or employment history, for instance, can be good icebreakers as they are fairly uncontroversial and easy to answer. The following sections transition to the core focus of the survey. Lastly, the ending section often offers respondents the possibility to comment on their perception and evaluation of the relevance of the survey's questions. More difficult or intrusive questions regarding, for example, a respondent's political ideology or religious beliefs can be

2. The tendency of the respondent to provide answers that appear as socially accepted even if they do not fit with their own opinions.

3. The difficulty to recall past experiences.

put at the end, with the hope that they will not dissuade the respondent from finishing the survey.

Survey Length and Completion Time

Survey length and the articulation of questions require careful consideration and compromise. With many researchers falling into the trap of asking too many questions, a good strategy is to start with an exhaustive list of questions followed by a reassessment of priorities and compromise to then shorten the list. This strategy could however become more complicated as the number of active research partners (and competing interests) increases.

Researchers also need to be attentive to the amount of time it takes to complete the survey, as time-consuming surveys run the risk of discouraging participation. When respondents are not remunerated, we advise an approximately twenty-minute WBS. Keeping completion time under thirty minutes is particularly important for professionals working in high-pressure environments who are persistently pressed for time. Face-to-face surveys are also an option and can last longer as IO professionals are more accustomed to being interviewed for forty-five to sixty minutes.

Sampling Techniques

Often in IO research, scholars are dealing with spatially dispersed and partly undetermined populations, making sampling a challenge. In our case, our interest in assessing diversity drove us to prioritize a global sample of aid professionals working in diverse locations. But how exactly can we go about sampling? Multiple pathways exist, though we view the following two sampling methods as the most ideal:

(1) *Quota sampling*: Use an available dataset cataloguing relevant organizations, such as the Yearbook of International Organizations dataset (UIA 2019), or a self-made dataset, such as the Humanitarian Organizations Dataset (Egger and Schopper 2022) when a ready-made one is not available to then select a representative sample of organizations. Survey distribution will subsequently be negotiated with each chosen organization.

(2) *Convenience sampling*: Use readily available mailing lists, such as the Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protec-

tion (PHAP)[4] mailing list, or social media groups, such as the "International Humanitarian and Development Professionals" LinkedIn group.

Distribution Strategies

Depending on the selected sampling technique, several distribution techniques are possible, each with advantages and trade-offs (see table 4).

At the end of the day, researchers should weigh the pros and cons of each distribution strategy to arrive at a decision that is most compatible with their interests and resources.

Data Analysis

There is no specific method to analyze survey data per se. Relevant qualitative and quantitative options need to be identified depending on the num-

Table 4. Surveys and Distribution Techniques: Advantages and Tradeoffs

Distribution Techniques	Advantages	Tradeoffs
Direct access through organizational actors	Robust, organization-wide sample; Nourish practitioner-academic exchange; Inexpensive; High response rate	Time consuming; Risk of access refusal; Potential intervention in research design; Biased responses due to feeling of organizational surveillance/control
Indirect access through networked intermediaries	Less time consuming; Inexpensive; Ability to reach an organizationally diverse population	Biased sampling; No control over respondent selection; Low response rate
Indirect access through social media platforms	Less time consuming; Inexpensive; Easy to disseminate; Ability to reach an organizationally diverse population	Biased sampling (exclusion of individuals not on social media or in social media groups); Inability to isolate "nonhumanitarian" respondents

4. PHAP is a member-based network of self-declared humanitarian professionals allegedly made up of 10 percent of the global population of aid workers, open to individuals with at least two years of "relevant experience" in the humanitarian sector.

ber of respondents, the sampling technique used, and the question design (i.e., open-ended or close-ended) and the overall objectives of the research (explore the attitudes of IOs staff, identify their determinants, or draw inferences). Based on these criteria, several strategies can be identified. As in qualitative content analysis, open-ended questions are best analyzed using deductive or inductive coding techniques. Descriptive statistics can be used to analyze answers to close-ended questions, focusing on a small sample of IO staff. Closed-ended questions collected on a large sample, however, are more amendable to methods used in statistical analysis, such as cross tabulation or regression analysis, to establish intervariable relationships or pinpoint patterns and probabilities. The exact type of analysis to be performed depends on the response scale used (i.e., nominal, ordinal, interval, or ratio).

What Challenges?

Just as with every method, survey-based research necessarily involves a number of challenges.

Sample Representability and Survey Reliability

No matter the sampling method, determining the representability of the sample population and the reliability of survey results is a major obstacle in survey research. Due to the absence of macro-data on humanitarian professionals, a gap that our research aims to fill, and the fluid boundaries of the sector, it is impossible to get an a priori sense of sample representativity. Our inability to measure the representativeness of our sample population then makes it difficult to assess the reliability of our results. The best way of dealing with these challenges is to avoid overgeneralizing, while condoning an iterative approach whereby the accumulation of knowledge will serve to improve future survey studies.

Access

Gaining access to a global population of professionals, characterized by a strong degree of geographic and institutional fragmentation, is a complicated endeavor. The essence of this fundamental problem stems from the fact that we are unable to contact potential respondents directly, meaning we must either seek formal authorization from an IO that will distribute our survey to their staff or operate through an intermediary. Inherent to the study of transnational professional populations, our only resolve is to accept these access constraints.

Survey Language

Working on a transnational population that is exceptionally diverse in terms of language and culture makes the survey's language a matter of concern. In light of our respective linguistic capacities, we initially started with an English and French version of the questionnaire. However, our fear is that participants, especially entry-level national staff, might not feel comfortable enough with either. In order to ensure participation across hierarchical levels, one strategy is to translate the survey into the four other official working languages of the UN. If, at the analysis phase, a low response rate among low-level national staff is observed, a follow-up strategy might be to pick two or three country-specific cases, translate the survey into the dominant local language, and redistribute the survey. Although translation comes with its own costs and issues, it would help to offset nonparticipation due to language barriers.

Question Inflexibility

Surveys are, by nature, definitive. Unlike in semistructured or unstructured interviews, the researcher cannot experiment with the way they formulate their questions or adjust their interview guide in a piecemeal fashion. If you realize a question is incomprehensible or creates confusion once the survey has been diffused, your only option is to throw out the first set of responses and start from scratch. However, this might be costly and potentially compromise your reputation and legitimacy. The best way of dealing with, or rather avoiding, this challenge is to spend sufficient time proofreading and testing survey questions. Using questions from high-quality surveys may also be a good strategy depending on the focus of the research.

To Go Further

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