

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH METHODS

Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of Chapter 2, students should be able to:

1. Clearly explain why no research study is perfect.
2. Give a history of the study of relationships including the prevailing attitude of psychologists in the first half of the twentieth century, the emphasis on laboratory experiments in the 1960s, and how the nature of relationship research has evolved since the 1960s.
3. Delineate three sources and two types of research questions.
4. Compare convenience sampling to representative sampling and discuss how volunteer bias can detrimentally affect both.
5. Describe the two different designs (correlational and experimental) available for answering questions about relationships, and the strengths and weaknesses of each.
6. Distinguish between laboratory and everyday environments, give the pros and cons of each, and discuss the study of “real” versus “as if” behavior.
7. Describe different types of data (self-reports, observations, physiological measures, and archival data), noting advantages and disadvantages of various techniques. Know when self-report is most accurate.
8. Enumerate the key safeguards for the welfare of participants in relationship research, relating these safeguards to the effects research participation can have on participants, how people feel about their experiences as research participants in studies on couples, and the benefits of research.
9. Explain statistical significance and meta-analysis, indicating why they are valuable in accumulating knowledge about relationships.
10. Specify the unique challenges and complexities presented by data obtained in relationship studies (interdependence of data and three sources of influence).
11. Discuss how new technology aids the study of relationships. Discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of high-tech methods such as IVEs.

Class Activity/Discussion Ideas

Thoughts about Relationships in History

Relationship science dates back to Aristotle. In small groups, have students discuss comments, literature, poems, and procedures used by the various early philosophers and intellectuals to qualify these historic ideas. What criteria did they ponder (e.g., beauty, faithfulness, love)? How did they support or analyze ideas? How is early philosophy different from and similar to today's contemporary material?

Dating Research

As described in the textbook, participation in a research on relationships can influence the relationships being studied. As a class, discuss: Would you participate in a dating research project? Would you participate in a sexual laboratory research study? Do you think participants in relationship and sexuality research are representative samples? Why or why not? Alternatively, have students read the scenario presented in the final section of the chapter *For Your Consideration*. How might Chris and Kelsey's participation in that study impact their relationship? Was the study done ethically?

Is Relationship Science Research Ethical: Panel Discussion

Form a classroom panel and discuss the topic "Is Relationship Science Research Ethical?" Assign or have students volunteer to be a panel member or an audience member, and instruct the panel members on the criteria they will need to prepare for the discussion. Also, inform the audience members how to prepare questions to ask the panelists.

Research on College Students

Hold a classroom debate on the following topic: Many research studies on relationships include college students as participants; however, the number of United States citizens who complete a college degree is small (about a third by recent estimates). How might the characteristics of those people who never attend college differ from those who attend or complete a degree? Could these differences affect the conclusions made about the

nature of relationships (e.g., dating and reciprocity, gender roles, sexuality, couples therapy)? Also, how might relationship variables change for those who completed college compared to those who are still in college (e.g., money, time, availability of dating partners, similarity among members of the social network)?

Design a Study

In small groups, have students develop a (make-believe) research question and choose a design that suits the study. They should discuss why that particular design might be best for their research question, paying particular attention to the pros and cons of the design and how that relates to issues with participants, setting, validity, and reliability.

Relationship Assessment Scale

To get students thinking about why researchers make the choices they do, ask them to get into small groups and examine *The Relationship Assessment Scale* presented in Table 2.2. Within their group, have them think about why the researchers reversed the coded items four and seven. What role might such techniques have in the use of self-report measures? Are there any drawbacks of doing this?

Let's Get Married

In the discussion about the place of research in government policy, you could show some or all of the Frontline report *Let's Get Married*. The report discusses various initiatives about marriage across the country and introduces the viewer to a number of individuals who have been or are thinking of marrying.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/marriage/>

Assignments/Student Projects

Relationship Information Online

As a way to get students to think about the relationship information they consume, ask them to visit several websites that offer relationship advice. Have them answer the following questions: Did these websites seem to offer legitimate advice about

relationships? Why or why not? What evidence did they provide that the ideas presented on the site would be helpful? Is that evidence legitimate?

Media Reports

Find an article from a print or online news source that relates to an issue in relationship science. Have students read that article and think critically about the issue. For example: What conclusions does the author make about this issue? What does he/she cite for backing up those conclusions? Are your interpretations of the results the same as the author's? What questions do you have about the designs and conclusions?

Don't the Girls Get Prettier

Before the assignment, make a copy of the article (listed below), based on the Mickey Gilley song, *Don't the Girls Get Prettier at Closing Time*, available to the students (e.g. on reserve at the library). Discuss the design of *The Relationship Assessment Scale* and suggest a follow-up study that includes design changes. Researchers published a number of follow-up studies, so search and bring these articles to class. In addition, discuss whether or not the researchers of the follow-up studies used their design suggestions or added ones they did not mention. Finally, comment on any ethical issues involving this line of research.

Pennebaker, J. W., Dyer, M. A., Caulkins, R. S., Litowitz, D. L., Ackerman, P. L., Anderson, D. B., & McGraw, K. M. (1979). Don't the girls get prettier at closing time: A country and western application to psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 5, 122–125.

Dating Research

Rather than (or in addition to) discussing desire to be part of dating research in class, ask students to reflect on this for themselves. Then have students ask others the same questions to see what kinds of questions or comments they might bring up. In a final written report students should provide their own reflection, the responses of those they asked, and a discussion of how the responses they obtained relate to scientific methods necessary in conducting research.

Design a Study Assignment

Rather than having students design a study in small groups in class (as suggested above), ask students to design their own research study, either with a research question you provide or one of their own choice. Students should describe why they chose a particular design, pointing out the pros and cons of that technique. They should describe the technology that they would use and how it would improve the study.