

On Surveys

Page Shepard 11/20/2021

I'm of the opinion that more alterhumans should dip their hands into surveys and questionnaires. A bit of a niche topic to be advocating for, surely, but let me make my case before any raised eyebrows get aimed my way.

Plenty of forums offer poll features, including Nonhuman National Park, Kinmunnity, and Therian Guide—these polls not only make a solid start to specific forms of discussion, but they also offer interesting insights into portions and aspects of the alterhuman communities that we might be able to postulate on but otherwise wouldn't have any sort of actual statistics to back or look on for reference. This is demonstrative of a value that exists on a scale much larger than just the environment offered by forums, especially in regards to more large-scale surveys and questionnaires that aren't aimed only at relatively small groups inhabiting specific websites.

By recording information and attitudes on larger or more frequent scales, we can track differences and shifts in community perspective as the years go by on, especially on topics of controversy or on identity commonalities within various groups (such as the amount of otherkin who are also transgender, for a fairly well-known example of something that has been recorded by multiple surveys over the years). It can offer eye-opening perspectives on what we think we know about alterhuman communities versus what the potential realities are and can even bring up connections that we see continuously reoccurring over the years. Knowledge is power, and data is knowledge: putting surveys and questionnaires out there gives us more power in writing and recording about our communities, identities, and even experiences to some degree.

I'm also, to be frank, ultimately exhausted with the completely out-there assertions that so many academics have made about nonhuman and alterhuman identities—Dr. Devin Proctor is, of course, excluded entirely from this complaint—especially regarding some of the assertions that individual scholars have made regarding the religiosity of otherkinity from a “big R” religion perspective. That is to say, from an organized religion perspective, filled with community, discourse, leadership, and some sort of overarching truth to be followed, and not from the

perspective of “little r” religion, which tackles religiosity of identity, subculture, and experience as something which is part of the lived, affective emotional economies that people engage in every day. The latter’s connection to alterhumanity is something I’ve been fascinated with myself! But the former is, to put it politely, an absolute crock of shit that anyone who spends more than a month within alterhuman spaces can see is clearly not applicable to alterhuman communities as a whole.

The fact is that if we want reliable and accurate information about ourselves out there in public spheres then we have to make it ourselves. And surveys and questionnaires are a decent qualitative place to start, something to engage with alongside the more personal and individual essays that we see elsewhere.

Or course, I’m not ignoring the fact that surveys, especially in-depth and large-scale ones, are difficult to wrangle even for the best of us. Gathering the raw data is hard by itself because of the potential for bias from the surveyor—I’ve personally seen it happen on surveys that are on particularly controversial topics. Framing your questions from a neutral perspective isn’t as easy as it first sounds, and there’s also the issue that some people might be inclined, consciously or unconsciously, to attempt to rig the surveys in their favor or in favor of making specific connection. That’s also just an issue with statistics in general, truth be told: there’s no definitive models in statistics, there are just models that are useful for showing us what we’re looking at (“all models are wrong, but some are useful,” to quote British statistician George E. P. Box.) This makes the potential for the manipulation of data a legitimate concern on multiple levels.

I also know that handling all that raw data after the fact can also be intimidating from personal experience. Plugging the data into Excel or R Studio and turning out graphs that look at the connections between questions isn’t something that everyone can readily do. While someone may be able to use the Google Forms pre-created graph, they might not feel confident in engaging their data beyond that, forget going out and publishing full-on textual breakdowns on it.

But even with these potential factors at play, I still think that it’s a better option than some of the alternatives. Because at the end of the day, who else are we going to rely on to reliably gather data about us? The non-alterhumans in the humanities? Don’t make me laugh. And I say that as someone in a humanities field, mind you.

I'm also not exactly advertising that everyone go hog-wild with surveys, especially without care to how they phrase things and how they go about sharing their findings, but I feel like it'd be both useful and interesting if we saw more of them out there. And in this age of technology and an unfortunate centralization of nonhuman and alterhuman communities, it's not a herculean task to set about, either—I've had superb luck with my small amount of surveys through advertisements on the major forums (Werelist, Kinmunnity, Nonhuman National Park, Therian Guide, etc.), social media platforms (Tumblr, Twitter, Discord, Amino, etc.), and word of mouth (the benefit of having friends that you can poke for help), and through just using Google Forms to collect the data. It takes time above all else, truth be told, unless you plan on doing a more in-depth breakdown, in which case it also takes blood, sweat, and tears. But forgoing that, it IS something that an interested party can engage in without fear!

To anyone who's been sitting on the fence about throwing out a survey on a topic that specifically interests them in the alterhuman communities, then I strongly encourage you to do so. My main recommendation would be to have multiple eyes on it before you go fully public with it, to help avoid typing errors/slanted questions, and to not have write-in answers when you can help it: they're hell if you want to sort the data later, because people will always write in answers that are explicitly included in the other options. Just trust me and leave it as "Other" with an optional longform or shortform write-in afterwards—this also gives the added benefit of letting people delve in-depth in ways that you can go back and quote in any breakdowns you do of the data if their commentary or explanation is particularly poignant or relevant. That's probably the biggest thing I've learned in the few surveys I've done, but I'm by no means an expert.

Beyond that, just make sure you're spreading your survey as wide as you can for applicable participants! Don't get let your results get messed up by small sample sizes, or by only posting about it on a single website and skewing the results that way. The more diversity, the better! Unless you mean to focus in on a specific website's perspective on something, at least.

Don't be afraid to mess up. If you want to ask questions, then just go ahead, and start asking! You'll never find answers to the things you're curious about if you never start looking into them.