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Ethics of “Taste, Ties, and Time”

In 2008, sociologist Kevin Lewis and colleagues conduced a research project, entitled “Taste, Ties, and Time (3T),” to examine how race and cultural tastes could affect people’s social relationships. Researchers collected 1,640 college students’ Facebook profiles from Facebook.com and combined these data with the students’ school records, creating a new social network dataset. Through subsequent quantitative analyses of the dataset researchers concluded that gender, race, and socioeconomic status all influenced how these students behaved in social networks. In addition, the results showed that students’ Facebook friendships were correlated with their cultural preferences. Lewis and colleagues’ findings were published in the journal Social Networks and opened up a new branch in social science research. Despite its scientific potential, the project attracted critics from the public as well as the scientific community. The researchers were accused of violating research ethics, such that they scraped data without gaining informed consent and invading the students’ personal privacy by releasing the dataset to other researchers (Zimmer, 2010). Consequently, the students in the 3T project were identified, resulting a withdrawal of the dataset (Salganik, in open review). In this essay, I evaluate how the 3T project adheres to Salganik's four principles of ethical research, which are Respect for Persons, Beneficence, Justice, and Respect for Law and Public Interest.

First of all, the 3T project violates the first principle, Respect for Persons, which is to ensure research participants’ autonomy (Salganik, in open review). According to the principle of Respect for Persons, people are entitled to be on their own free will to decide whether or not to participate in a given study. Additionally, special population such as children and prisoners are required to be treated with additional cautions. Researchers implement Respect for Persons by obtaining participants’ informed consent, a comprehensive written document allowing participants to be aware of the study’s procedures and potential risks. In the 3T project, researchers used students’ Facebook profiles data without the students’ awareness, not to mention obtaining informed consent. Such conduct clearly disobeyed the Respect for Persons principle. Although Lewis and colleagues claimed that when people registered for a Facebook account they agreed to allow Facebook to use their online data for research purposes by checking the term of use, it is still the researchers’ responsibility to explicitly give the students an opportunity to choose if they wanted their data to be included. After all, not many people carefully read all the items in term of use. Admittedly, violating the principle of Respect for Persons does not doom a study to a forbidden fate, but rather it alerts the researchers that their study needs amendments for being a more ethical one.

Besides violating the principle of Respect for Persons, the 3T project also violates the second principle of research ethics, Beneficence, by exposing the students’ personal information to the public. The Beneficence principle states that researchers need to make sure the risks and benefits of a research study are in the right balance (Salganik, in open review). Specifically, the principle of Beneficence requires researchers not to harm participants in any means and maximize potential benefits while minimizing possible risks. With no direct benefit to the students on an individual level, the 3T project clearly invaded students’ privacy and used their personal information without consent. Such conduct may cause emotional discomfort to students after they learn about the project. Furthermore, although the researchers employed some data protection measures to ensure students’ anonymity, students’ identity was decoded quickly following the release of the dataset (Zimmer, 2010). The disclosure of students’ identity and personal information, such as home address, could bring considerable negative impact to them. Admittedly, it is difficult and in most cases impossible for researchers to precisely predict every possible benefit and cost, especially in the big data era. At least Lewis and colleagues could try harder to encrypt the data and think twice about the informational risk before they published their dataset.

Next, the 3T project misaligned with the third principle of ethical research, Justice, which is defined by Salganik (in open review) as “ensuring the risks and benefits of research are distributed fairly.” Namely, participants in different conditions of a study should be treated equally and researchers must not take advantage of any vulnerable population. In the 3T project, although all students received the same treatment, they are to some degree vulnerable targets for the researchers to conduct research on. Lewis and colleagues did not randomly select their participants from a given population. Instead, they chose these students on purpose. Also, the researchers had easy access to students’ university records. All of these actions violate the principle of Justice and should be reconsidered in future studies involving college students.

Last but not the least, the forth principle is Respect for Law and Public Interest. The fact that the 3T project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Harvard University showed that Lewis and colleagues obeyed the laws. In addition, Lewis and colleagues opened their research methods to the scientific community. The profound results of the 3T project also led to some public interest, as it provides insight on the evolvement of people’s social relationships and connects social science research to the Internet. Therefore, Lewis and colleagues’ actions were aligned with the principle of Respect for Law and Public Interest.

In conclusion, although Lewis and colleagues’ 3T project was passed by their institution’s IRB, in my opinion, the project violates three out of four principles of ethical research proposed by Salganik. I highly doubt it will be allowed to carry out at the present time. Nonetheless, the dataset collected through the 3T project has many uniquely attractive features, including natural research instruments, completeness, and comprehensiveness, as Lewis and colleagues (2008) advocated in their journal article. From the researchers’ perspective, it is a valuable dataset to work on. If I were to conduct a research project on topics related to social network and relationships I would want to use such dataset. However, I would never use this dataset as Lewis and colleagues did. I would try my best to obtain informed consent from the students before I used the dataset and find a secure way to encrypt the data. In the worst scenario when the information risk is inevitable, I would give up using the dataset. I would not harm the reputation of scholarship.

Works Cited

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