**Conducting Survey studies: ethical considerations for academicians**

**Introduction**

A survey study can be defined as ‘*a collection of information from individuals through their response to questions’* [1]. The survey research has its origin in the early 20th century in England and America where they were used as the means to investigate social problems like poverty [2]. Today, surveys are used not only in academic research but also for market research by corporates. It has been a popular mode to collect data that could be analysed and interpreted to draw the necessary inference about a situation or a subject. This data is commonly collected in the form of a quantitative method like a questionnaire, or a qualitative method like in depth interview or a combination of both methods called as a ‘mixed methods’ approach [3]. Survey methods may sound simple, easy to execute and quite unchallenging relative to the research planned in laboratories or clinical trials to many. However, it is important to understand that conducting ‘quality’ surveys involves consideration of many aspects. One of these is the ethical conduct of survey research which involves obtaining Institutional Ethics Committee approval and informed consent from the study participants.

Ethical guidelines that have described risk in studies involving human volunteers have classified survey studies as ‘less than minimal risk’ [4]. Therefore, quite often the need to have an in depth ethical review of such studies is debated. The purpose of ethical review and informed consent process is to ensure that the rights, safety and wellbeing of the study participants are protected [4]. In the process of safeguarding participants, exemption from ethical review for a study should not be based only on the level of risk involved. The tendency to exempt a study on this grounds could at times compromise the quality of the survey research done. Therefore, the concept of relaxation of norms for ethics committee review and informed consent process needs a rethinking. The present article sheds light on some of the ethical issues involved with survey research which every stake holder of a survey research must note.

***Obtaining ethics committee approval***

The purpose of an ethics committee is to ensure that a given research on a human participant is in compliance with the existing ethical guidelines [5]. These guidelines that govern clinical study conduct emphasize that ‘*voluntary assertion of participants*’ is a mandatory requirement for any study [6-8]. However, quite often, survey studies which involve the enrolment of human participants are termed different from clinical studies. If we look at this process from the lens of certain regulations like the Ethical guidelines on biomedical research by ICMR (2017), this type of research qualifies as ‘*less than minimal risk’* study [4]. Quite often, based on this, it is assumed that a survey research is ‘exempt’ from ethical review. Regulations in certain countries allow this exemption [9]. The term’ risk’ or ‘harm’ is never only physical but also psychological. In survey research, the element of physical harm does not exist however, psychological harm cannot be ruled out. In such cases it is important that an ethical oversight is maintained before the study is executed. In certain cases, vulnerable population like sexual minorities, children, prisoners may be also be enrolled and obtaining an ethical review would become a critical part of the process. Assessment of the relative risks and benefits of the process through a committee of experts in such cases would help ensure the ethical conduct of the study. Unfortunately, in several academic institutions the motivation to seek an ethics committee approval is driven by overcoming the ‘publication barrier’. There have been instances wherein the studies exempted from review based on local regulations have been rejected by the journals due to no ethics committee approval [10]. This has driven the need for obtaining ethical reviews for survey among many academicians. Unfortunately, the core purpose of an ethical review that is protecting patient rights and wellbeing has taken a backseat in the process. The question that arises then is, ‘can the need for IEC approval be meant only for meeting the requirements of the regulations and journals?

Survey research usually involves minimal risk and some institutions have the policy of constituting the ‘survey coordination committee’ which oversees the sampling, ethics and design of these survey projects [11]. The challenge here is that all members in such committees could be from the same institute and then the need to have members who have diverse background, from different institutions may not be met [12]. Quite often, the type of information that is collected for a survey needs an oversight. This is to ensure that the confidentiality of the data will be maintained and that adequate provisions are in place for it. However, how impartial will be the decision of this local committee also needs to be understood. The very purpose of ethical review is to minimise the harms which should not be undermined due to the existing bias. There is need for guidelines to ensure that the survey studies that are usually exempt from ethical reviews meet certain standards that safeguard participants against these harms. In the absence of regulatory guidance, policies at the institutional levels must be advocated. A table below describes a checklist which could be used as a reference while reviewing such survey studies.

**Table 1**: Checklist for ensuring ethical conduct of survey studies during review

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| --- | --- |
| **Sr. No** | **Points to be checked** |
| 1 | Is all the information about the purpose and rationale of the study given to the participant? |
| 2 | Are the participants informed that their data will be kept confidential? |
| 3 | Are there provisions to protect the participants’ data? |
| 4 | If yes, list the provisions made by the researcher? |
| 5 | Will the researcher share the outcome of the research with the participant? |
| 6 | What methods will the researcher use while obtaining responses to difficult questions to prevent psychological harm? |

***Informed Consent***

The second most important component after ethical review in a clinical study is that of obtaining informed consent. Every research involving human participants must ensure that a valid informed consent is obtained from the study participants prior to enrolment in a trial. In a survey study, the need to obtain a consent largely exists from the objective of preventing ‘informational harm’. The survey involves collection of a lot of data and accessing this data would require the voluntary consent of the participant. Therefore, each participant before enrolment must be appraised with the risks and benefits of the study, voluntary participation and the confidentiality of the data collected. All of these are the key elements of any consent process and thus, even if the legal provisions of a particular country do not bind on researchers to obtain consent they must consider obtaining it.

The method of obtaining informed consent is also important here. Literature suggests that for survey based studies the consent process could be executed in a concise way. However, disclosure of the psychological harm, maintenance of confidentiality of data are important components of any research and every participant should be made aware of it through the informed consent process [11]. Therefore, what should be the format of the ‘concise form’ needs to be defined. Informed consent helps to build trust among the participants about the purpose of the research however, sometimes, obtaining consent could also be challenging, especially when participants refuse to sign the form and assert their consent verbally to fill in the questionnaire. Would a verbal consent with documentation suffice in such a case? At times an ethical dilemma is created when there is consent to fill in a questionnaire but not to sign the ‘informed consent form’. This is common in developing settings where people have the fear that their signatures and details might be misused. Therefore, the reluctance is more due to lack of trust rather than the inability to participate in the study.

The failure to understand the need for the informed consent process could be a reason for this difficulty. In online surveys, the issue of obtaining ‘informed consent’ is critical. Some strategies that have been highlighted to improve the quality of informed consent process include ‘*interactive discussions, creative graphics, support for revisions and standardization*’ [12]. Use of such techniques might help in improving understanding of the concise consent form and enable the participants to give their approval for the study. Another challenge is that there is maintenance of anonymity in such surveys and at times it is difficult to ascertain whether the right person has filled in the survey response. One way to overcome this difficulty is through creation of biometric systems online [13] which help to attest or verify the credibility of the participant answering the survey. Also, there is need to create greater awareness about the role and purpose of informed consent and why it is relevant for the survey research. Participant advocates could play an important role here. Through sharing of experience about the process they could encourage more people to enrol ethically and this will improve the quality of the research.

**Informed Consent and Challenges with Online surveys**

The conduct of online surveys has grown in recent times. Factors like ease of conduct, ability to reach to a larger audience and the availability of the necessary technology have all made it easy to execute such surveys. The conduct of an online surveys however, come with their own set of challenges, one of which includes the administration of the informed consent form. Quite often, many online consent forms could be in a concise manner. There is often no clarity on to what extent the information disclosed through these forms is adequate. Also, is the information adequate to enable them to take the decisions? The informed consent that involves a human to human interaction cannot be equated with an online system where it is ‘assumed’ that understanding is achieved. In an online survey, this assumption of understanding is based on the ‘click’ of the ‘I consent’ button. The lack of comprehension about the study among participants in such studies could pose as an ethical issue and one possible solution could be encouraging ‘online interaction’ with the participants. This online interaction can be made possible through use of some technological tools [14]. It could also help researchers elaborate on the risks and outcomes of the study and at the same time provide an assurance that online surveys are filled based on a complete understanding of the study.

**Incentives in surveys**

Incentives are a type of compensation given to research participants. The objective of such a compensation is to make up for the loss of time and inconvenience that is caused to the participants during the course of the study. A survey study is usually a low risk study with minimal discomfort and providing an incentive may often be equated with ‘undue inducement’. Quite often, incentives either monetory or non monetory may be offered in such studies to increase the response rate. However, a study by found that monetory incentives were more beneficial in increasing response rates rather than the non monetory ones like a thank you note [15, 16]. The monetory incentives however do not work when the risk involved in a study is very high. This indicates that ‘monetory incentives’ do not affect an individual’s decision on safety and wellbeing. The need for incentives and the type of incentives that are adequate for a particular type of survey should however be carefully considered. For eg: a survey study which involves disclosure of sensitive information, could have social repercussions and one needs a careful evaluation of whether incentives must be provided or not. The whole idea behind this would be to discourage any thought process that jeopardise the participant’s voluntary decision to answer the survey. Therefore, such studies must undergo ethical scrutiny prior to conduct.

**Generalizability and selection bias in online surveys**

Web based surveys have become popular in recent times due to the ease of administration and the ability to reach to a wide range of audience. The process of data collection using a web based or online survey is not that simple. For example, several online surveys may involve technical challenges like under coverage and self-selection. Under coverage means that the survey which is administered is not reaching the entire target population [17]. Only those who have access to internet and connectivity are able to fill in the survey. While, self-selection means that participants decide for themselves if they are getting enrolled in a study [17]. Due to these challenges, the ‘frame population’ or the participants enrolled in a study may differ in terms of characteristics form the ‘target population’. Thus, the outcome of a survey study may not be reliable and the results obtained cannot be extrapolated to the general population. Considering this, the ethics committees that permit the conduct of online survey studies must assess if adequate measures are in place to deal with these challenges. Such evaluations however, are required on a case to case basis and the need may vary depending on the type of target population and objective of the study.

**Conclusion:** The purpose of safeguarding participant safety, rights and wellbeing is essential for all studies. Survey studies have minimal risk relative to the interventional studies however, the objective of conducting a quality survey cannot be fulfilled without meeting the ethical requirements. Therefore, ethics committee approvals and informed consent process in survey studies must become a prerequisite rather than an obligation for a researcher to fulfil.

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