Case Study: Inappropriate Use of Surveys

Title: Critical Analysis of Survey Misuse in Research: Ethical, Social, Legal, and Professional Implications

Introduction

Surveys are integral tools in various fields, including academic research, marketing, and public policy, providing valuable data for decision-making and knowledge generation (Bryman, 2016). However, unethical design or deployment of surveys—such as manipulation, fabrication, or violations of consent—can lead to significant ethical, social, legal, and professional consequences. This analysis critically examines three illustrative cases: the Cambridge Analytica scandal (2018), the Burlington Public Schools Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2025), and the LaCour and Green fabricated study (2014–2015). By situating these cases within the broader literature on research ethics, consent, and data governance, the analysis highlights the risks of misusing surveys for ulterior motives and evaluates implications across multiple dimensions.

Case 1: Cambridge Analytica and Political Profiling (2018)

The Cambridge Analytica scandal exemplifies large-scale misuse of surveys. Through personality quizzes distributed via Facebook, the firm harvested personal data from millions of users and their networks, which were subsequently used to build psychographic profiles for political campaigning in the United Kingdom and the United States (Confessore, 2018; Isaak and Hanna, 2018).

Critical Implications:

- **Ethical:** The absence of informed consent directly contravened principles of autonomy and respect for persons (Nissenbaum, 2010).

- **Social:** Manipulated voter perceptions eroded democratic trust, undermining collective decision-making (González-Zapata and Heeks, 2020).

- **Legal:** Regulatory scrutiny followed, with Facebook fined £500,000 by the UK Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) and $5 billion by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (BBC News, 2019). These sanctions reinforced the importance of compliance with data protection frameworks such as the EU's GDPR.

- **Professional:** The case catalysed debate on professional responsibility in data science, leading to calls for stronger adherence to codes of conduct such as those of the ACM and BCS.

Case 2: Burlington Public Schools Survey Scandal (2025)

In March 2025, Burlington Public Schools (Massachusetts, USA) administered the federally mandated Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which contained explicit questions on sexual behavior, gender identity, and substance use. Critically, the survey was distributed to students even when parents had formally opted them out, prompting an investigation by the U.S. Department of Education (New York Post, 2025).

Critical Implications:

- **Ethical:** Administering sensitive surveys to minors without respecting parental opt-out constitutes a breach of informed consent and child protection norms (Alderson and Morrow, 2020).

- **Social:** Parents expressed anger and distress, with claims of emotional harm to children and a breakdown of trust between families and the school system.

- **Legal:** The incident raised concerns regarding potential violations of the U.S. Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA), which requires schools to obtain parental consent for sensitive surveys (US Department of Education, 2024).

- **Professional:** Administrators faced criticism for governance failures and lack of accountability, underscoring the importance of robust protocols, staff training, and ethical oversight in educational contexts.

Case 3: Fabrication in Academic Survey Research – LaCour and Green (2014–2015)

The publication of LaCour and Green's (2014) paper in *Science* claimed that personal conversations with gay canvassers could significantly and durably change attitudes toward same-sex marriage. Subsequent investigations revealed that survey data had been fabricated, leading to the paper's retraction in 2015 (Konnikova, 2015).

Critical Implications:

- **Ethical:** Data fabrication represents a fundamental breach of research integrity, contravening academic standards of honesty, accuracy, and accountability (Resnik, 2015).

- **Social:** The false findings from LaCour and Green's study misled advocacy groups, policymakers, and the wider public, potentially shaping activism strategies on the basis of fraudulent evidence (Broockman et al., 2015; Konnikova, 2015).

- **Legal:** While no criminal liability emerged, the scandal stimulated reforms in academic publishing, including greater emphasis on replication and data transparency (Nature, 2015).

- **Professional:** The LaCour and Green case highlighted reputational risks to researchers and institutions, strengthening arguments for mandatory open data policies and replication studies in social sciences (Scoggins, 2024; Gundersen et al., 2024).

Synthesis: Broader Impacts Across Cases

Case	Ethical	Social	Legal	Professional
Cambridge Analytica (2018)	Deception around consent, profiling (Nissenbaum, 2010; Isaak and Hanna, 2018)	Undermined democratic norms, privacy fatigue (González-Zapata and Heeks, 2020; Confessore, 2018)	Fines to Facebook (£500K UK, $5B FTC), GDPR awareness; legislative scrutiny (BBC News, 2019)	Heightened demand for data ethics; reputational fallout for firms and professionals (Isaak and Hanna, 2018; González-Zapata and Heeks, 2020)
Burlington Schools (2025)	Consent breach, parental rights (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; US Department of Education, 2024)	Emotional distress, institutional distrust (New York Post, 2025; Alderson and Morrow, 2020)	Investigation under PPRA; policy reform underway (US Department of Education, 2024; New York Post, 2025)	Administrative overhaul, training emphasis (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; New York Post, 2025)
LaCour & Green (2014)	Fabrication, research fraud	Misguided policy, disillusionm	Institutional oversight improved	Requiring transparency, replication,

	(Resnik, 2015; Broockman et al., 2015)	ent with academia (Konnikova, 2015; Broockman et al., 2015)	(e.g., data-sharing policies) (Nature, 2015; Scoggins, 2024)	and verification (Scoggins, 2024; Gundersen et al., 2024)

Cross-Case Analysis

A comparative lens reveals consistent themes across these cases. First, consent and transparency are central: both Cambridge Analytica and Burlington cases demonstrate how ignoring informed consent undermines trust and violates ethical standards. Second, misuse of surveys erodes public confidence, whether in democratic processes, educational systems, or academic institutions. Third, the legal dimension varies: while Cambridge Analytica incurred significant regulatory fines, Burlington's case triggered statutory investigation, and LaCour's misconduct primarily prompted institutional reforms rather than legal sanctions. Professionally, each case underscores the need for strong ethical codes, oversight, and accountability frameworks to mitigate risks of misuse.

Conclusion

Surveys, when conducted responsibly, can generate invaluable insights for research and governance. However, the Cambridge Analytica, Burlington, and LaCour cases illustrate how inappropriate use—through deception, coercion, or fabrication—can generate profound harms. For postgraduate researchers and practitioners, these cases highlight the imperative of embedding ethical reflexivity, respecting participant autonomy, and aligning professional conduct with established codes and legal frameworks. Strengthening regulatory oversight, institutional safeguards, and professional accountability is essential to restoring trust in survey research and preventing future misconduct.

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