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## Ethics in Surveys

### RESPECTING RESPONDENTS' RIGHTS

Treatments of the survey process do not always include discussions of survey ethics, but ethics is an important topic that should be considered in all types of research. Many ethics rules for research with human subjects have been developed over the past half-century, and these rules directly affect surveys. These are not sources of survey error in the same sense as the topics of chapters 4 through 11, but they constitute restrictions on surveys that should be kept in mind. After reviewing the basic ethical standards, this chapter discusses professional codes of conduct and governmental regulations on human subjects research. (Related topics include interviewer falsification in chapter 4 and disclosure rules in chapter 13).

### Ethical Standards

Ethical rules for survey research are relatively new developments. They are based mainly on a few simple principles: the importance of obtaining informed consent from participants, the need to ensure confidentiality of responses, and taking account of the power relationships in surveys.<sup>1</sup>

#### Q. Informed Consent

The most basic ethics rule for human subjects research is that the participants must give informed consent to participate in the research. This rule encompasses several aspects: that the participation be voluntary and that they should be informed of possible risks.

The first protections for human subjects were drafted in the aftermath of World War II. Nazi doctors in German concentration camps conducted inhumane research on detainees. As part of the war crime trials, the victorious Allies wrote the Nuremberg Code, which mainly emphasized the need for participation in research to be voluntary. This requirement leads to restricting research on prisoners and others who cannot give meaningful consent. Students in classes are also captive audiences, so this rule implies that they should not be required to participate in research, except to the extent that research is part of the actual instruction. Consequently, when students are offered extra credit for participation in studies, the instructor is often required to make an alternative extra-credit assignment available to students who do not want to participate in the research projects.

As a result of several controversial research studies that included deception of subjects and especially as a result of concern about the safety of biomedical research, a blue-ribbon commission issued the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1979). This report proposed three principles for human subjects research: beneficence (minimizing possible harm), justice (that the participants benefit from the research), and respect for persons in the form of obtaining their knowing consent to participate.

If consent to participate is to be meaningful, research participants must first be told about possible risks of the research. One potential risk is that asking or answering a question could cause some respondents mental distress. Stress is most likely to arise in surveys in in-depth interviews in which respondents are asked to remember traumatic episodes, such as in interviews of military veterans about a war or of New Yorkers about the attacks of September 11, 2001. The usual response is that no one has ever suffered lasting psychological harm from an interview. The risks involved in participating in a survey are no greater than these people would encounter in everyday life. Asking questions can cause momentary upset, but most people find it therapeutic to talk about their problems. If people are embarrassed by an answer, they can refuse to answer or can lie, and interviewers are trained to accept answers as legitimate even if they are suspicious of them. Indeed, the benefits of the survey usually outweigh the risks. Respondents generally report they enjoy surveys, and the potential benefits to society from surveys on sensitive topics (such as HIV-related behavior) are considerable. Some research suggests that people express less embarrassment about sensitive questions in an interview if they are

told first that it will include some questions about the topics, such as alcohol and sex (Singer 1978), but, in fact, there is not enough research about this to be confident of the result.

When there is a chance of risk to respondents, AAPOR recommends telling people that the questions can cause discomfort and that they can skip questions that they do not want to answer, with a debriefing at the end of the interview to see if any matters were upsetting and to see if respondents have further questions.

The potential for risk is greatest when respondents admit to illegal or stigmatizing behavior that could later be made public. As described in the next section, it is vital in this situation that identifier information, such as the person's name, address, and/or phone number, be separated from the data after the interview has been verified and that the identifier information be stored securely. Also, the researcher should make certain that respondents cannot be identified through analysis of the data; thus sometimes identities are concealed by altering identifying demographic information.

The usual rule is that people must give written consent that they agree to participate in research studies. Written consent is, of course, impractical in telephone surveys, though respondents must still be given some basic information and at least implicitly consent to the interview. Some interviewing operations tell the respondent something like "This interview is voluntary and confidential; if I ask you a question that you do not want to answer, just let me know, and we will go on to the next question." Respondents can consent in Internet surveys by clicking an "accept" button after being informed of risks and benefits, or implicitly by choosing to participate in the survey. It is also often necessary to make sure that the person is not a minor, as by asking, "Are you at least eighteen years of age?" unless, of course, the survey is an approved study of minors. Survey researchers generally fear that stressing the voluntary nature of participation will have the effect of decreasing response rates, but it is still important to make sure that participation is meaningfully voluntary.

### Confidentiality

Another basic ethical rule for survey research is that the confidentiality of the respondent should be protected. Interviewers generally have to promise confidentiality in order to get the interview, so maintaining confidentiality is partially a matter of keeping this promise. Confidentiality is particularly vital when the survey obtains sensitive information.<sup>2</sup> Researchers are sometimes concerned that confidentiality assurances would decrease response rates. However, a meta-analysis (Singer,

Von Thurn, and Miller 1995) has found that response rates are higher on studies involving sensitive topics when strong assurances of confidentiality are given.

Some surveys are totally anonymous, without any material that identifies the respondent. For example, there would be no way to know who filled out which questionnaire when a large lecture class fills out self-administered questionnaires. However, potential identifying material is usually obtained in interviewer-assisted surveys, such as the respondents' addresses in face-to-face surveys, their phone numbers in telephone surveys, and their e-mail addresses in e-mail surveys, in which case it is important to maintain confidentiality.

The best procedure to achieve confidentiality is to have as few identifiers as possible on interviews and in computer files. When possible, the researcher should keep the identifiers in a separate limited-access file, such as by giving each interview a unique number with the decoding scheme existing only in that separate file. If the respondent's name was obtained, it should be deleted as soon as possible. Similarly, addresses and phone numbers should be deleted, or maintained with restricted access if reinterviews are planned. Similarly, it is best to keep geographic identifiers broad enough that the exact location of the interview cannot be determined. Questionnaires with identifying material on them should be kept in a locked location and should be destroyed when they are no longer needed.

The confidentiality problem extends to the release of public use data. Sometimes enough information is obtained about respondents to identify them. For example, if a survey of teachers includes the state and city in which each school is located, the age, gender, and race of its principal, and the number of students per grade, a teacher given access to the data might be able to recognize the school. In this situation, it is incumbent on the researcher to modify enough of the nonessential identifying material to preclude identification, such as by altering the age of the principal. The identification problem also occurs in business surveys. Businesses are often asked to provide information that they would want to keep private for competitive reasons, so it is important that data are not reported in such a way as to breach promised confidentiality, even in tabulations of results.

*Disclosure analysis* involves looking for "indirect identifiers" in a data set that could pose a risk for later reidentification of respondents, so at least the respondent would have deniability if identified. This would be particularly important in dealing with subgroups, as, for example, if a survey file in the

U.S. happened to include one Buddhist doctor in a small town who has an income of more than \$300,000. Researchers often "blur" such data so that reidentification cannot be achieved with certainty. Several methods have been developed to minimize the chances of identifying respondents. Biemer and Lyberg (2003, 105) list five methods for ensuring confidentiality: anonymization by removing identifiers, suppression by deleting a variable value that permits identification (especially when so few cases have a particular value that identification of cases is possible), collapsing categories ("coarsening the data") along with "top coding" so all high values are given the same value, adding noise (a random value, sometimes known as *perturbation*) to the value of a variable, and encryption. Additionally, some organizations swap some data values from one case to another, so that the frequencies on variables are unchanged. These studies should publish the percentages of items and cases involved in such data swapping, so it is known how much uncertainty this adds to subsequent data analysis. The Census Bureau handles the disclosure problem by releasing only samples from its data collections. It is common in some establishment surveys to delete data values in published tables if it is clear that the results in the cell in question must have come from only one or two firms.

Special procedures should be taken to protect the confidentiality of surveys on topics that potentially raise legal issues. Prosecutors can seek access to survey data when they believe that it is relevant to a criminal case, and courts are likely to order that access be given. Other participants in legal proceedings sometimes seek access to survey records. For example, the lawyer for an Ohio State University assistant professor who was denied tenure requested a university survey on sexual climate. Our survey operation (Polimetrics, at the time) realized that the dean of her college was instantly identifiable, given that there were codes in the data for each respondent's college and administrative position, so we declined to provide the data in a usable form. Fortunately, the assistant professor's lawyer accepted our response rather than testing the applicability of the state's open record law in court.

An unusual confidentiality issue arises when one is using information on the Internet. For example, would it be appropriate to analyze people's statements about public policy issues that they have posted on a message board or in a chat room? Search engines often can locate such postings, making it possible to sample from among them. The people posting such messages did not consent to participate in the research, yet they posted their views in a public site. One standard is to get the approval of the site administrator before using such data, but there is no universally accepted

standard. A useful discussion of such problems appears in a special issue of *Ethics and Information Technology* (2002, vol. 4, issue 3).

For elite interviewing, the distinctions are between answering "on the record," "not for attribution," "on background," and "off the record" (Goldstein 2002). "Not for attribution" means that answers and quotes can be used, so long as the respondent is not identified as the source. "On background" means that answers can be used only to inform the investigator's further research, while "off the record" means that the answers cannot be used in any way.

Additionally, it is common for survey organizations to require all of their employees to sign confidentiality agreements, promising that they will not tell people information they obtain as part of their employment. This is particularly important in small communities where interviewers are likely to recognize the names of people who are in their sample; it would be inappropriate for the interviewers to gossip about how those respondents answered the questions.

### Power Relationships

Another ethical issue involves the proper power relationships in surveys. George Gallup (American Institute of Public Opinion 1939, 6) originally envisioned surveys as empowering people, providing a means by which leaders would know "the true state of public opinion" and could take that into account in their actions. Nowadays we are more realistic both about the possibilities of determining the true state of public opinion and about whether leaders would always follow that opinion, but the notion of surveys as empowering remains potent.

However, some (e.g., Mishler 1986) would argue that the standardized interview puts respondents into a dependent situation, essentially stripping them of power. Forcing answers into narrow categories prevents respondents from giving their own stories in their own voices (see Gubrium and Holstein 2002, chap. 1). This is not simply a matter of the use of closed-versus open-ended questions, since coding open-ended material into categories for systematic analysis would provoke similar criticisms of depersonalizing the respondents (see Briggs 1986). One solution would be unstructured in-depth interviewing combined with qualitative analysis, instead of large-scale standardized surveys.

Feminist perspectives raise further questions as to both what the answers of women respondents mean (are they speaking as women?) and the control relationships when the interviewer and respondent are of opposite genders. Comparable issues arise in interviewing members of

minorities, even when the interviewer is part of that minority group. This is a difficult topic to resolve, but minimally it suggests that considerable sensitivity is in order when writing questions, so as to think through how those questions would affect different types of respondents.

It has also been argued that surveys involve control by the researcher of the interviewer, carefully limiting how the interviewer can behave when taking the interview. Another control issue occurs in cross-cultural research when researchers from one country determine the questions to be used in other countries. In recent years it has become more common to have cross-national research teams jointly prepare the questions, which lessens the problem of cultural imperialism in research.

An additional argument is that polling has transformed the nature of public opinion. There have always been many ways of expressing public opinion, such as petitioning government, discussion in salons and coffee-houses, and writing letters to newspapers. These forms often involved deliberation to achieve consensus as to the common good (Herbst 1993). By contrast, modern public opinion polling focuses on individual views, with less opportunity for sharing of information in ways that have people consider both sides of an argument. The deliberative poll is one attempt to shift the balance back (see chapter 3), but its applicability is quite limited. Giving voice to the views of common people through polling may empower them, but perhaps in a manner that changes the nature of democratic dialogue for the worse.

Ethical issues, by their very nature, are inherently difficult to resolve, but the power relationships are particularly unsolvable. Some would see these issues as illustrating how social research extends social inequalities, whereas others would still view surveys as giving the public a chance to voice its opinions and affect public actions.

### **Professional Conduct Codes**

When ethical standards became commonplace in scientific research, professional organizations developed codes of ethical conduct. Like other professions, survey research organizations have instituted their own codes of professional conduct. The most important of these is the American Association for Public Opinion Research code, which is reprinted in the appendix to this chapter. It speaks of the importance of confidentiality and the need to avoid harming respondents, but it also addresses other concerns including the importance of appropriate methods, analysis, and interpretations.



Additionally, AAPOR has condemned particular polling practices, most notably push polling. Push polls occur when election campaigns claim to be doing a poll to see how people would react if they were told damaging information about the candidate's opponent. Push polls are really just smear campaigns disguised as surveys, and they serve only to increase public distrust of surveys in general.

AAPOR also has been critical of phone-in and click-in polls. It issued a press release during the 2000 campaign, disapproving of television network claims that their click-in polls and focus groups provided accurate representations of public opinion on the presidential debates. It also condemned the misuse of respondent information when an organization that had claimed to conduct a survey gave respondents' identity and answers to the Wisconsin Republican Party for its 1988 'get-out-the-vote' drive.

Two other survey organizations have professional conduct codes. The Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO), which focuses on commercial survey companies (see <http://www.casro.org/>), has provided guidelines for many aspects of the survey operation. Its most innovative standards, shown in the box on the opposite page, are for Internet research, applying the principle of respondent privacy to this new survey mode. The National Council of Public Polls (NCPP) guidelines also suggest that Internet-based surveys be designed to be representative, provide evidence of being demographically representative, not be click-in polls, and prevent people from participating multiple times.

## **Governmental Regulations**

Dissatisfaction with protections for human subjects in some scientific fields has resulted in the federal government's requiring that all organizations that receive federal funds—which includes virtually all U.S. universities—have institutional review boards (IRBs) to review all proposals for human subjects research. The legal basis for this is the National Research Act of 1974, which led to the writing of the Federal Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. Researchers must submit detailed descriptions of their proposed research procedures to their local IRB, which must grant approval *before* the research is conducted. Universities will not accept dissertations on human subjects that do not have IRB approval, and human subjects research that is carried out without IRB preapproval could be found (by the IRB) to constitute "scientific misconduct."

### CASRO Standards for Internet Research

The unique characteristics of Internet research require specific notice that the principle of respondent privacy applies to this new technology and data collection methodology. The general principle of this section of the Code is that survey research organizations will not use unsolicited emails to recruit respondents for surveys.

1. Research organizations are required to verify that individuals contacted for research by email have a reasonable expectation that they will receive email contact for research. Such agreement can be assumed when ALL of the following conditions exist:
  - a. A substantive pre-existing relationship exists between the individuals contacted and the research organization, the client or the list owners contracting the research (the latter being so identified);
  - b. Individuals have a reasonable expectation, based on the pre-existing relationship, that they may be contacted for research;
  - c. Individuals are offered the choice to be removed from future email contact in each invitation; and,
  - d. The invitation list excludes all individuals who have previously taken the appropriate and timely steps to request the list owner to remove them.
2. Research organizations are prohibited from using any subterfuge in obtaining email addresses of potential respondents, such as collecting email addresses from public domains, using technologies or techniques to collect email addresses without individuals' awareness, and collecting email addresses under the guise of some other activity.
3. Research organizations are prohibited from using false or misleading return email addresses when recruiting respondents over the Internet.
4. When receiving email lists from clients or list owners, research organizations are required to have the client or list provider verify that individuals listed have a reasonable expectation that they will receive email contact, as defined in (1) above.

Source: Council of American Survey Research Organizations, <http://www.casro.org>

Many IRBs are more familiar with the risks involved in medical research than in survey research, and unfortunately they sometimes try to apply the same rules to surveys as they would to medical research where there is potential risk of death. As a result, the AAPOR Web site, <http://www.aapor.org>, gives several practical suggestions for how to respond to some concerns that IRBs often raise about surveys.

Certain categories of research are considered exempt, though exemption requires a formal written exemption. Generally the chair (or a designee) of the IRB must approve the exemption request, so that there is some written evidence that an exemption has been granted. Categories that are normally exempt include (1) research on education, (2) many surveys, (3) research on politicians, (4) use of existing data, (5) evaluation research, and (6) food research. However, exemption does not apply to research on

children and other special populations (such as prisoners) nor to research that involves deception and/or stress to participants. Also, exemption does not apply if disclosure of participants' responses could place them at risk in legal terms, financially, or in terms of their reputation.

Much survey research is able to pass through this web of regulation fairly easily, so long as the research is on adults, does not involve deceiving respondents, and would not create stress in the respondents. Deception is usually not necessary in surveys. If deception is employed, an IRB will require that respondents be told about the deception in a debriefing at the end of the interview. The IRB will also insist that the confidentiality of respondents be guaranteed, unless they consent to have their identity revealed.

IRBs are concerned with guaranteeing informed consent. They are used to requiring written consent forms for medical research studies. Such forms are rarely used in survey research, however, since people can simply refuse to participate in surveys and can skip particular questions they do not want to answer. Federal regulations (CFR 46.117c) indicate that IRBs can waive requirements for signed consent forms when the research poses only minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context, but local IRBs are responsible for interpreting these regulations. An IRB is most likely to require written consent forms when sensitive information is being obtained, when there are limits to the confidentiality being guaranteed to respondents, when there are reasons to believe that participation in the survey is not entirely voluntary, and/or when the researcher plans to combine the survey answers with other information about the respondent, such as health records. The federal regulations do permit waiver of signed consent if the proposed research cannot be practicably carried out without the waiver, as in random-digit-dialing telephone samples in which respondents' addresses are not known in advance to the researcher—though some survey researchers have had to argue with local IRBs that wanted to require written consent forms for telephone surveys.

Generally IRBs also require that certain types of information be disclosed to the respondent at the beginning of the interview. This includes the name of the company doing the interviewing, the sponsor, and a very brief description of the survey (e.g., "We are talking to people tonight about their feelings on current affairs"). The respondent is also to be told whether or not the answers are confidential, be assured that participation

in the survey is voluntary, and be reminded that questions can be skipped if he or she desires.

Researchers in many fields feel that the IRB process has become overly onerous (Shea 2000). Local IRBs have wide discretion, and they vary widely in their interpretation of the rules. It is common for an IRB to require changes in research plans before granting approval and to require any later changes in procedures to be cleared with it. Because the IRB wants assurances that subjects will not be unduly stressed in the study, it may insist on seeing the questions to be asked of respondents, and it may expect to see any changes made to those questions. The IRB process can take several weeks, partly because IRBs often meet once or twice a month and partly because of the time involved to get approval after required changes are made. This can lead to an unfortunate incentive for researchers to not be fully candid with their IRBs, which leads to a spiral effect with IRBs becoming more suspicious of the information that researchers give them.

In addition to federal government restrictions that have led to IRBs, there are some federal laws and regulations regarding commercial phone calls to residences. These laws are usually intended to limit telemarketing, but some are written so broadly that they could affect surveys. In particular, the 1991 Telephone Consumer Protection Act and the 1995 Telemarketing and Consumer Fraud and Abuse Prevention Act are relevant federal regulations, though phone calls for research purposes are exempt from regulation. Also, the federal do-not-call list specifically exempts legitimate survey research. To complicate matters further, many state governments have enacted laws that affect telemarketing directly and may affect surveys indirectly, with the specifics naturally varying between states.

### **Ethics and Survey Constraints**

Maintaining ethics in research is an important responsibility but is often considered an inconvenience by researchers. Going through an institutional review board can take time, which is often in short supply when one is facing a deadline to get a survey in the field. Ethical constraints can be seen as an additional constraint on surveys, forcing investigators to think through what information they really require.

Another ethical consideration involved in face-to-face interviewing is protecting the interviewer. Interviewers should not be sent to high-crime areas and should not be expected to go to potentially dangerous areas,

especially at night. Interviewers who are afraid of going to an area because of safety issues should not be forced to do so. This can lower the response rate and increase the time required to complete the interviewing, but it is a necessary constraint.

When designing surveys, researchers always consider their budgetary constraints and how much time they have to obtain results. Ethical considerations should be routinely added to this list of items to consider in designing studies.

## **Appendix: AAPOR Code of Professional Ethics**

### **Code of Professional Ethics and Practices**

We, the members of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, subscribe to the principles expressed in the following code. Our goals are to support sound and ethical practice in the conduct of public opinion research and in the use of such research for policy and decision-making in the public and private sectors, as well as to improve public understanding of opinion research methods and the proper use of opinion research results.

We pledge ourselves to maintain high standards of scientific competence and integrity in conducting, analyzing, and reporting our work in our relations with survey respondents, with our clients, with those who eventually use the research for decision-making purposes, and with the general public. We further pledge ourselves to reject all tasks or assignments that would require activities inconsistent with the principles of this code.

### **The Code**

#### *I. Principles of Professional Practice in the Conduct of Our Work*

A. We shall exercise due care in developing research designs and survey instruments, and in collecting, processing, and analyzing data, taking all reasonable steps to assure the reliability and validity of results.

1. We shall recommend and employ only those tools and methods of analysis which, in our professional judgment, are well suited to the research problem at hand.
2. We shall not select research tools and methods of analysis because of their capacity to yield misleading conclusions.
3. We shall not knowingly make interpretations of research results, nor shall we be tacitly permit interpretations that are inconsistent with the data available.

4. We shall not knowingly imply that interpretations should be accorded greater confidence than the data actually warrant.

B. We shall describe our methods and findings accurately and in appropriate detail in all research reports, adhering to the standards for minimal disclosure specified in Section III.

C. If any of our work becomes the subject of a formal investigation of an alleged violation of this Code, undertaken with the approval of the AAPOR Executive Council, we shall provide additional information on the survey in such detail that a fellow survey practitioner would be able to conduct a professional evaluation of the survey.

## *II. Principles of Professional Responsibility in Our Dealings with People*

### **A. THE PUBLIC:**

1. If we become aware of the appearance in public of serious distortions of our research, we shall publicly disclose what is required to correct these distortions, including, as appropriate, a statement to the public media, legislative body, regulatory agency, or other appropriate group, in or before which the distorted findings were presented.

### **B. CLIENTS OR SPONSORS:**

1. When undertaking work for a private client, we shall hold confidential all proprietary information obtained about the client and about the conduct and findings of the research undertaken for the client, except when the dissemination of the information is expressly authorized by the client, or when disclosure becomes necessary under terms of Section I-C or II-A of this Code.
2. We shall be mindful of the limitations of our techniques and capabilities and shall accept only those research assignments which we can reasonably expect to accomplish within these limitations.

### **C. THE PROFESSION:**

1. We recognize our responsibility to contribute to the science of public opinion research and to disseminate as freely as possible the ideas and findings which emerge from our research.
2. We shall not cite our membership in the Association as evidence of professional competence, since the Association does not so certify any persons or organizations.

**D. THE RESPONDENT:**

1. We shall strive to avoid the use of practices or methods that may harm, humiliate, or seriously mislead survey respondents.
2. Unless the respondent waives confidentiality for specified uses, we shall hold as privileged and confidential all information that might identify a respondent with his or her responses. We shall also not disclose or use the names of respondents for non-research purposes unless the respondents grant us permission to do so.

*III. Standards for Minimal Disclosure*

*This section is reprinted in chapter 13.*

## **Survey Errors**

### **COPING WITH SURVEY CONSTRAINTS**

The total survey error approach emphasizes the several possible sources of survey error, along with constraints that affect the minimization of those errors and various effects that are inherent in surveys. Taken together, these different elements provide an overarching perspective on survey research, a paradigm for a new science. Yet it is a science that will keep evolving, and technology change will directly affect how surveys are conducted in the future, just as it has in the past.

#### **The Theory of Survey Error**

This book has emphasized survey errors, but that should not be taken as a warning against conducting survey research. Instead, the explicit focus on sources of error should be seen as an advantage of the survey research literature. All research is susceptible to a variety of types of error, but rarely are the different sources of error diagnosed and dissected as completely as they have been in the survey field. It would be unrealistic to require a hermetically sealed error-free environment for the conduct of human research. What is necessary instead is an awareness of the potentials for error along with an understanding of how to minimize each source of error, as has been the focus of this book.

#### **Types of Error**

To review very briefly: measurement error occurs in all research, including surveys. Behavior of interviewers is one source of measurement error