



## *Ethical Issues in Survey Research*

**Like all social research, surveys should be carried out in ways designed to avoid risks to participants, respondents, and interviewers. This chapter summarizes procedures for ethically managing surveys.**

Like all research that involves human subjects, the survey researcher needs to be attentive to the ethical manner in which the research is carried out. A basic guideline is that the researcher should make sure that no individual suffers any adverse consequences as a result of the survey. Moreover, to the extent that it is feasible, a good researcher also will be attentive to maximizing positive outcomes of the research process. The foundation for most of the guidelines for protecting human subjects in research in the United States is the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, 1979).

Almost all universities and most other organizations in the United States that conduct federally funded research have an Institutional Review Board (IRB) that is responsible for overseeing research involving human subjects. When research is proposed, the Principal Investigator must submit the proposed protocol for IRB review before beginning to collect data.

IRB review is designed to protect subjects, researchers, and institutions. In general, the board's greatest concerns are about research that involves some kind of risk to participants. "Research activities in which the only involvement of human subjects will be . . . educational tests, survey procedures, or observation of public behavior . . . [are] exempt" unless:

1. information is recorded in such a way that human subjects can be identified. . . . **and**
2. any disclosure of the human subjects responses. . . . could reasonably place subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation. (Department of Health and Human Services, 2005, p. 5)

Under these guidelines, many, if not most, surveys are technically exempt. That means that there is no basis for the IRB to scrutinize the details of the research or to recommend changes. However, because they involve subjects, material must be provided to the IRB so that someone (often the Chair) can

determine that the protocol meets those standards. If the survey does involve some level of potential risk, or if vulnerable populations are involved, the IRB has the responsibility formally to review all procedures to make sure the human subjects are well protected.

In this text, it is not possible to address all the issues that may be involved in studies of special populations. Research on children, the mentally retarded, the mentally ill, prisoners, and other special populations may require attention for which researchers may get guidance elsewhere. Sieber (1992) provides much more detail on how to address data collection in an ethical way, as does a 2003 report from The National Academy of Sciences (Citro, Ilgen, & Marrett, 2003). The following, however, are some ethical principles about doing surveys of general populations with which all survey researchers should be familiar.

### INFORMING RESPONDENTS

The survey research process generally involves enlisting voluntary cooperation. It is a basic premise of ethical survey research that respondents should be informed about what it is that they are volunteering for. Respondents should have the following information before being asked to answer questions:

1. The name of the organization that is carrying out the research. If an interviewer is involved, the respondent also should have the interviewer's name.
2. The sponsorship, that is, who is supporting or paying for the research.
3. A reasonably accurate, though brief, description of the purposes of the research. Is the research trying to increase general or basic knowledge, or is there some planning or action process that the research is designed to assist? What issues or topics is the research designed to cover? What questions is the research designed to address?
4. An accurate statement of the extent to which answers are protected with respect to confidentiality. If there are risks to or limits on the confidentiality that is being offered, they should be stated clearly.
5. Assurance that cooperation is voluntary and that no negative consequences will result for those who decide not to participate in the survey study.
6. Assurance that respondents can skip any questions that they do not want to answer.

This information may be mailed in advance or given directly to respondents, if the design permits. Regardless of what else is done, though, interviewers

(if they are used) should be required to review the above points with respondents before beginning an interview.

Finally, perhaps a word is appropriate about signed consent forms. Generally speaking, respondents to sample surveys are not asked to sign forms prior to completing an interview. Obviously, it is not feasible to obtain signed forms on telephone surveys. Even in personal interview surveys, however, most thoughtful review committees feel that signed consent forms are not needed. In most cases, the risks involved in participation in surveys are quite minimal and well under the control of the respondent. In addition, respondents have an opportunity to re-exercise their decision to participate in a survey every time a new question is asked.

There are some exceptions. A signed form provides evidence that the researchers and their institutions in fact exposed respondents to certain key facts and that respondents agreed to the terms of the research. Researchers and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) are more likely to want written documentation that respondents were fully informed when

1. Particularly sensitive information is collected that could, in fact, embarrass or harm someone if it became public.
2. There are important limits to the confidentiality of the data.
3. The population may lack the judgment or power to decline participation (e.g., children, prisoners, employees, students).
4. Access to information previously collected for some nonresearch purpose, such as medical records, is being sought in addition to survey answers.

These cases are the exception, not the rule. Most survey interviews do not require signed consent forms—only protocols that ensure that respondents are informed before they agree to participate. Again, Sieber (1992) discusses consent forms well.

### PROTECTING RESPONDENTS

If a sample is drawn from a list, such as members of an insurance plan or employees of an organization, one very basic tenet of ethical research is that sample members' lives should not be adversely affected in any way by whether or not they agree to participate. To that end, whether or not people respond should not be shared with anyone outside the research team, and, when it is potentially an issue, sample persons should be assured that there will be no adverse results (e.g., on their health benefits, services, work situations, or grades) if they choose not to participate.

Beyond that, the main issue with respect to protecting survey respondents is the way in which the information they provide will be treated. Maintaining confidentiality in general is easier when answers are entered directly into a computer than when there is a paper questionnaire or interview schedule. Some standard procedures that careful survey researchers take to minimize the chances of a breach of confidentiality are as follows:

- All people who have access to the data or a role in the data collection are committed in writing to confidentiality.

- Links between answers and identifiers are minimized. Names, e-mail or postal addresses, and telephone numbers are the most common identifiers. Often names are not required in order to execute a proper survey; when they can be avoided, many survey organizations do not use names in any part of the research process.

- When there are specific identifiers such as names, addresses, or telephone numbers, they are put in a form that can be readily separated from the actual survey responses. Identifiers (other than a coded id number) should be physically removed from completed survey instruments as soon as possible.

- If names or addresses were used to identify the sample or collect data, those names and addresses are deleted or destroyed once they are no longer needed.

- Completed survey returns are not accessible to nonproject members. If they are in paper form, keeping them in locked files is preferred.

- Individuals who could identify respondents from their profile of answers (e.g., supervisors in the case of a survey of employees, or teachers in the case of a survey of students) are not permitted to see the actual survey responses.

- The actual data files usually will have some kind of an ID number for each respondent. The link between the ID number and the sample addresses or the identifiers is not available to general users of the data file.

- During analysis, researchers are careful about presenting data for very small categories of people who might be identifiable.

- When a project is completed, or when use of the actual survey instruments is over, it is the responsibility of the researcher to see to the eventual destruction of completed survey research instruments, or their continuing secure storage.

Obviously, deviation from these particular procedures may be required for a given project. The general approach and concerns reflected in this set of procedures, however, should typify any responsible survey research project.

One low probability but important possible limit to promised confidentiality of survey data is that questionnaires and records can be subpoenaed by a court. Researchers can protect themselves from this threat to promised confidentiality in several ways. If research involves especially sensitive material, such as drug or criminal justice studies might entail, researchers can petition federal or state agencies for a certificate of confidentiality that provides protection from subpoena. Alternatively, concerned researchers can destroy the link, before any subpoena is issued, between identifiers and responses so that it is impossible to associate respondents with their answers. If maintaining the link is essential, as in the case of a longitudinal study that entails repeated contact with respondents, researchers have been known to send the file linking individuals and responses to another country, out of the jurisdiction of U.S. courts. Again, Sieber (1992) is a good source for more detail on these issues.

### **BENEFITS TO RESPONDENTS**

In most surveys, the main benefits to respondents are intrinsic: enjoying the process of the interview or feeling they contributed to a worthwhile effort. More direct benefits, such as payment, prizes, or services, are sometimes provided. When services are offered, attention must be paid to providing them in a way that does not compromise the promised confidentiality of the survey answers. Also, as the use of cash incentives to participate becomes more common, concern has been raised that incentives should not be so large that it becomes unreasonably difficult for some respondents, particularly those in financial distress, to say "no." Benefits should not be so great as to undermine the principle that research participation is a voluntary act. Other than that, the key ethical responsibility is to be certain not to overstate the benefits and to deliver the benefits promised. In particular, the researcher who enlists cooperation by describing the uses of the research assumes a commitment to ensure appropriate analysis and dissemination of the data.

### **ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES TO INTERVIEWERS**

Beyond the obligations of any employer, the researcher has responsibilities to interviewers in two areas. First, the interviewer is given the responsibility of

presenting the research to the respondents. It is the researcher's obligation to make sure that interviewers have full and accurate information to give about the research. The researcher should not put the interviewer in a position of being deceptive, misleading, or inaccurate.

Second, the researcher must deal with interviewer safety and fear of crime. Because general household samples will include all areas, interviewers may have to visit neighborhoods in which they do not feel safe. The following guidelines may be helpful:

- Interviewers legitimately can be asked to visit sample addresses in a car before deciding they do not feel safe. Neighborhood areas are heterogeneous and vary from block to block.
- Interviewers should be told explicitly that it is not a job requirement to go somewhere under circumstances that they feel are unsafe. Options include avoiding night calls, using weekend days to interview employed people, and interviewing with another interviewer or a paid escort. A good approach is to ask interviewers to work with the field supervisor to figure out how to carry out interviews in a way that feels safe.
- Interviewers should be briefed on sensible procedures to reduce the risks of their being victims.

Fortunately, victimization is rare; fear is more the problem. In our society, however, crimes do occur. Both researchers and interviewers need to feel that interviewers were informed and were not pressured to go anywhere or to do anything that would increase the real likelihood that they would be a victim of a crime.

## CONCLUSION

The ethical issues in survey research are not different from those in the social sciences in general. The real risks and potential costs of being a respondent (or interviewer) in most surveys are minimal. Certain basic steps, though, are needed to reduce whatever risks there are either to participants or to the image of social science researchers. The specific steps outlined above are by no means exhaustive. The basic approach of dealing with everyone in an honest way, however, with continuing attention to the details that will maximize benefits and avoid costs, should be an integral part of any survey research effort.

**Further Readings**

- Citro, C., Ilgen, D., & Marrett, C. (2003). *Protecting participants and facilitating social and behavioral sciences research*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Groves, R. M., Fowler, F. J., Couper, M. P., Lepkowski, J. M., Singer, E., & Tourangeau, R. (2004). *Survey methodology* (Chap. 11). New York: John Wiley.
- Sieber, J. (1992). *Planning ethically responsible research: Developing an effective protocol*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.