

Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods

Survey Ethics

Contributors: Lisa M. Gilman

Editors: Paul J. Lavrakas

Book Title: Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods

Chapter Title: "Survey Ethics"

Pub. Date: 2008

Access Date: October 15, 2013

Publishing Company: Sage Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412918084

Online ISBN: 9781412963947

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963947.n565>

Print pages: 866-868

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Research Methods. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963947.n565>

Survey ethics encompasses a set of ethical procedures that are intended to guide all survey researchers. These procedures are essential to the research process so that explicit care is taken that (a) no harm is done to any survey respondent, and (b) no survey respondent is unduly pressured or made to feel obligated to participate in a survey. This entry discusses informed consent, the rights of respondents, and the social responsibility of researchers.

Informed Consent

The ethics of survey research and its importance often are not covered thoroughly in research methods textbooks and courses. However, the acquisition of knowledge through survey research requires public trust and, therefore, researchers must adhere to ethical practices and principles involving human subjects. Most governmental bodies throughout the industrialized world have established ethical guidelines for conducting survey research. Research proposals often are subject to regulatory review by one or more ethics boards (e.g. an institutional review board) that have been established to ensure that the ethical guidelines set forth by the governing body will be followed. In addition to regulatory bodies overseeing research activities involving human subjects, most professional organizations and associations also have established guidelines and standards of conduct for conducting research that are expected to be maintained by organizational members. The primary tenet among these governing bodies and organizations, as it relates to carrying out research on human subjects in an ethical manner, is that the researcher be cognizant of research participants' rights and minimize the possibility of risk (i.e. avoid exposing research participants to the possibility of physical or psychological harm, discomfort, or danger).

To that end, central to all research ethics policy is that research participants must give their informed consent voluntarily. The purpose of informed consent is to reasonably ensure that survey respondents understand the nature and the purpose of the survey, what is expected of them if they participate, the expected length of time necessary for them to complete the survey (and, if a longitudinal study, the frequency with which their participation will be requested), how the data will be utilized, and their rights as research participants, including their right to confidentiality. Based on the information provided

by the researcher, potential respondents can then make an informed determination as to whether they are willing to participate in a given study (i.e. give their consent). In addition to the willingness to participate, it is fundamental that potential respondents have the competence to **[p. 866 ↓]** understand why the study is being conducted and what their rights and responsibilities are as respondents in order to participate.

Survey research among children and adolescents under the age of 18 requires parental or guardian consent before the researcher can even speak with the juvenile. Frequently parental consent must be given in writing through use of either an active or passive consent form. Also, some ethics boards may require, in addition to parental consent, the assent of juvenile participants. If assent is required of juvenile participants, they must also have the capacity to comprehend the purpose of the study and their rights and responsibilities as participants.

Respondents' Rights

Respondents' rights are paramount to any ethical survey research project and an integral part of informed consent. Researchers have an obligation to their subjects to minimize the possibility of risk. Granted, respondents participating in the bulk of survey research are not generally at a high risk of physical or psychological harm. However, some survey research topics are very sensitive in nature and may cause a considerable amount of discomfort for some respondents. In addition, researchers are ethically bound to report any child abuse that is suspected. Therefore, it is essential to minimize risk through a thorough advance disclosure of any possible harm or discomfort that may result from survey participation. If there are compelling scientific reasons that respondents must be kept "blind" to, or entirely deceived about, some of the aspects of a study before they give their consent, and while the study is being conducted (e.g. an experimental design would be compromised if the respondents knew it was being conducted), then it is the responsibility of the researcher to debrief the respondents about any deception they may have experienced, even if it can be argued that the deception was trivial in nature. It also is the responsibility of the researcher to "undo any harm" he or she may have caused associated with any deception or other withholding of information.

Furthermore, respondents are afforded additional rights that also minimize any risks associated with their participation, including the right that their responses will be kept confidential and the right to privacy. Confidentiality protects respondents' identities so that their participation in a given study cannot be determined and, likewise, ensures that their responses are not linked to them personally. The importance of maintaining confidentiality is closely related to minimizing risk. For example, survey data on a study of criminal behavior could be subject to subpoena, but if identifier data are never collected or are destroyed, the individuals and their responses cannot be identified. Thus, the data collected through the survey research process should not contain identifying information about individual respondents, and data records should be securely stored and destroyed as soon as is appropriate.

Survey research is intrusive in nature: Respondents are asked to reveal personal information about themselves, their behaviors, and their beliefs. Thus, researchers must consider respondents' right to privacy when administering surveys. The right to privacy does not suggest that personal questions should not be asked of respondents (as long as they are relevant to the study being conducted), but it protects respondents from disclosing such information if they choose not to respond. In other words, respondents' right to privacy is the freedom afforded survey respondents to control the personal information that is disclosed, under what circumstances they will do so, and with whom such information is shared. Subjects must be informed that their participation is voluntary, that their refusal to participate will not involve any penalty, and that they may skip any question they do not feel comfortable answering or discontinue their participation at any time.

In some instances, respondents are provided incentives for their participation in a given study; however, this does not negate their right to skip certain questions or end their involvement in the study at their will. Furthermore, incentives should never be used to "coerce" (even subtly) a respondent to participate in a study or to answer a specific question if he or she really does not want to do so. Ethical researchers do not force, coerce, "seduce," trick, or otherwise threaten potential subjects when attempting to gain cooperation or administer a survey.

Social Responsibility

Social responsibility is key to survey ethics. Research findings contribute to the larger body of knowledge for purposes of better understanding social behavior [p. 867 ↓] and improving the quality of life among members of society. Thus, researchers have an obligation of being forthright not only with research participants but also with society in general. Deception in research practices and principles can lead to public distrust and bring even the best research under public and professional scrutiny. Ethics boards ensure, in principle, that a given study meets ethical guidelines. However, there is little ethical oversight once data collection has begun. As such, regulation and oversight through audits of individual researchers' or research firms' ethics policies and practices regarding survey research could potentially decrease public deception and potential harm.

Researchers have an obligation to protect and respect not only the rights of research participants, but to society as a whole as well. Informed consent outlines the information necessary for respondents to make voluntary informed decisions about participating in a given study based on their understanding of what the study is about, how the data will be used, and what their rights and responsibilities are as participants. Research participants' rights are paramount when conducting survey research. If the study cannot be designed ethically, then it should not be conducted. The continuation of survey research as an invaluable tool for gathering information is contingent upon maintaining public confidence which can only be accomplished through upholding ethical practices and principles.

Lisa M. Gilman

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963947.n565>

See also

Further Readings

Areen, J. (1991). Legal constraints on research on children. In B. Stanley , ed. & J. E. Sieber (Eds.), *The ethics of research on children and adolescents* . Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Israel, M. , & Hay, I. (2006). *Research ethics for social scientists* . Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sales, B. D. , ed. , & Folkman, S. (Eds.). (2000). *Ethics in research with human participants* . Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Sieber, J. E. (1992). *Planning ethically responsible research: A guide for students and internal review boards* . Newbury Park, CA: Sage.