

Chapter 5

Ethical Issues in Surveys

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This chapter traces the ethical standards for survey research back to the more general ethical principles underlying those standards and examines their expression in the ethics codes of the major international survey organizations as well as in laws governing research in the United States and in Europe. The chapter argues that in the case of survey research, the most serious risk of harm to which participants are subject is a breach of confidentiality and the consequences that may flow from such a breach, for example the loss of reputation or employment or the risk of civil or criminal prosecution. Much of the chapter is devoted to ways of avoiding such breaches, through the training of interviewers and other staff in appropriate means of protecting data confidentiality and through careful scrutiny of the data released to other researchers and the public. The chapter also reviews research on public attitudes toward ethical issues, especially confidentiality and privacy. It reviews research on the effects of ethical requirements, for example the requirement for obtaining informed consent, on the quality of survey research. In conclusion, the chapter points to some emerging issues in the area of ethics and survey research, including the fact that the quality of the research is itself increasingly being regarded as an ethical issue. That is, if the design or execution of the research is such as to yield no useful findings, it may be unethical to ask people to participate in it, especially if it exposes them to greater than minimal risk of harm. Throughout, the chapter has tried to integrate three aspects of ethical concerns: principles, practices, and research on the consequences of ethical concerns and practices for survey participation.

GLOSSARY OF KEY CONCEPTS

Autonomy. The right of self government.

Beneficence. In Belmont Report, the requirement to minimize possible Harms and maximize possible benefits for the subjects of research, and to decide when research may be permissible in spite of the risk of harm, and when it may not.

Justice. In Belmont Report, the requirement to achieve some fair balance between those who bear the burdens of research and those who benefit from it.

Respect for persons. The basis for the informed consent requirement

Informed consent. The “knowing consent of an individual or his legally authorized representative ... without undue inducement or any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, or any other form of constraint or coercion.”

Privacy. The right to determine when, and under what conditions, to reveal information about oneself to others.

Confidentiality. The safeguarding, by a recipient, of information about another individual.

Plagiarism. The theft or misappropriation of intellectual property or the substantial unattributed copying of another’s work.

Fabrication. Making up data or results and recording or reporting them.

Falsification. Manipulating research materials, equipment, or processes, or changing or omitting results such that the research is not accurately represented in the research record.