ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE CONDUCT OF SURVEY RESEARCH

Timothy Johnson
Survey Research Laboratory
University of Illinois at Chicago

Outline

- Quick case studies
- Professional standards
- Informed consent
- Confronting survey nonresponse
- Respondent incentives
- Secondary research subjects
- Standards for minimum disclosure of survey methods
- Best advice
Quick Case Studies

1. Tuskegee Syphilis Study
2. Tearoom trade study
3. Nixon and the pollsters
4. Scott Peterson murder trial
5. AAPOR Ethics Violations
   • Frank Lutz
   • Gilbert Burnham
   • Strategic Vision LLC

American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)

Code of Professional Ethics and Practices—May 2010
(paraphrased)
Principles of Professional Practice

- Use appropriate tools/analysis
- Do not select tools/analysis that mislead
- Do not knowingly misinterpret
- Do not knowingly interpret with greater confidence than data warrant
Principles of Professional Responsibility in Dealings with People

- The Public (*correct any distortions*)
- Clients or Sponsors (*confidentiality; limitations of methods*)
- The Profession (*disseminate ideas & findings; not cite AAPOR membership*)

Principles of Professional Responsibility in Dealings with Respondents

- Avoid use of practices that may harm, humiliate, or mislead survey respondents.
- Maintain confidentiality of responses and identifying information (unless respondent waives confidentiality for specified uses).
Other professional codes of conduct

- Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO)
- American Statistical Association
  - Section on Survey Research Methods
- Marketing Research Association
- American Sociological Association

Informed Consent

"...the knowing consent of an individual or his legally authorized representative, so situated as to be able to exercise free power of choice without undue inducement or any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, or any other form of constraint or coercion."

Effect of Providing Information About Survey Content and Purpose

- Information about content has no perceptible effect on response rates or quality (item nonresponse).
- Respondents who are given more information about sensitive content are more likely to report, in retrospect, that they expected the questions and that they were not upset or embarrassed by them.

Effect of Anonymity and Assurances of Confidentiality

- Verbal assurances of confidentiality seem to have modest positive effects on survey response rates and on response rates to sensitive questions, as well as on estimates of the amount of income and the frequency of other sensitive behavior.
- Studies assuring respondents of anonymity, rather than confidentiality, likewise seem to produce modest positive effects.
- Overly elaborate assurances of confidentiality may defeat their purpose by heightening respondent’s anxiety and perceptions of the sensitivity or threat of the survey.
Confronting Survey Nonresponse

- Response rates continue to fall
- Considerable research concerned with addressing this problem
- Need to be aware that almost any attempt to reduce nonresponse may have ethical implications

Respondent Incentives

- Best available strategy for improving survey participation rates
- When do incentives work best?
- When do incentives become coercive?
- What about lotteries?
Secondary Research Subjects

- When survey respondents report information about other persons, those persons are considered secondary research subjects.
- This approach is central to collecting social network data.
- When is a secondary research subject’s consent required?

Protecting Respondent Information

- Everything should be password-protected.
- Identifiers & consent forms should be stored separately from survey data.
- Use interviewer/staff confidentiality agreements.
- Quality control considerations.
- What about highly sensitive data?
Interviewer Commitment to Integrity

The Survey Research Lab at the University of Illinois has strict standards for research integrity. In order that everyone understands these standards you are asked to go to the following website http://www.vpaa.uillinois.edu/policies/ai_toc.asp?bch=0 and read the University of Illinois Policy and Procedures on Academic Integrity in Research and Publication. “This document articulates University policy on academic integrity in research and publication, and prescribes procedures for impartial fact-finding and fair adjudication of allegations of academic misconduct. Although it focuses upon deterring and penalizing unacceptable conduct, its purpose is to promote compliance with the highest scholarly standards.”

Upon completion of reading the content of the website you are asked to sign below that you understand the University’s commitment to promoting compliance to high scholarly standards.

I (NAME)_________________________________________________________

have read and understand the contents of the University of Illinois web site http://www.vpaa.uillinois.edu/policies/ai_toc.asp?bch=0 including Section III which discusses Academic Misconduct which includes, but is not limited to, the fabrication and falsification of data.

I understand that falsification of any data while conducting surveys is a serious offence that will result in termination and the potential for criminal prosecution.

Interviewer Signature

Date

Standards for Minimal Disclosure

☐ Who sponsored & conducted survey

☐ Exact wording of questions (including preceding Interviewer instructions or Respondent explanation)

☐ Definition of study population and sampling frame

☐ Description of sample selection procedure
Standards for Minimal Disclosure 2

- Sample sizes, completion rates, eligibility criteria and screening procedures
- Precision of findings (sampling error and weighting)
- Which results are based on parts of the sample rather than on the total sample
- Method, location, and dates of data collection

Best Advice

- Put yourself in the shoes of the Respondent.
- Consult and comply with available codes of conduct.
- Be aware of the empirical literature concerned with informed consent.
- Have all survey projects reviewed by UIC IRB.
Thank You.

Contact me at: timj@uic.edu