

Ethics Codes and Survey Researchers

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Abstract

In the past ten years, professional ethics codes affecting research activities have taken on a more important role in conducting surveys. Many professional societies have recently updated their ethics codes. Federal agencies are asking professional societies and academic and non-academic institutions to become more active in developing ethical guidelines and monitoring the research integrity of their members. US federal policies are encouraging local Institutional Review Boards to monitor more research activities, which results in increased monitoring of survey research.

Survey researchers are affected by federal definitions of research ethics and also by multiple professional society ethics codes. Most research protections guidelines are based on the Belmont Report. In this paper, I compare a variety of ethics codes that might affect survey researchers with the principles of the Belmont Report and on two additional issues - confidentiality of data and conflicts of interest. The codes are also compared with current federal guidelines on human subjects protections (45CFR46). An analysis of the codes does not indicate any major inconsistencies but the emphasis and details differ across codes.

Introduction

In the past ten years, review and regulation of research activities have affected the design and processes for conducting surveys. For academic and policy research organizations, institutional review board decisions are taking on increasing importance in research design. Federal agencies are asking professional societies and academic and non-academic institutions to become more active in developing ethical guidelines and monitoring the research integrity of their members. Many professional societies such as the American Sociological Association, the American Statistical Association, and the American Psychological Association have recently updated their ethics codes to include additional guidelines on research activities. (The American Psychological Association is currently revising its code again.) As a result, survey researchers must be aware of an increasing number of rules and guidelines that affect their professional activities.

Historical Context

In the early 1970's concern for the protection of human subjects was strongly influenced by the discovery of the Tuskegee Experiment. The 1974 National

Research Act created the commission that produced the Belmont Report in 1978. The Belmont Report described the ethical foundations that provided protections for research on human participants. However, the intellectual and philosophical bases of the Report can be found in the Nuremberg Code and the Declarations of Helsinki. While both focused more on biomedical than social research, the principles are similar.

In the US, many professional societies started to develop codes of ethics during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Milgram Experiment, Project Camelot, Tea Room Trade, and other research activities generated concern by professional societies that social research might endanger those who participate in it. The statements on human research participant protections in the codes of professional societies had their basis in the Belmont Report. However, the professional and disciplinary societies' codes generally contained guidelines on other professional activities.

That is, professional societies developed codes of ethics to cover a variety of professional issues. Most codes for organizations whose members engage in research with human participants make statements about researcher/participant interactions. In addition, some codes of ethics often provide practice standards. For example, the AAPOR and NNCP codes focus heavily on reporting standards. Some codes provide guidance on a variety of professional behavior issues. Some areas might include truth in advertising, employer/employee relationships, treatment of students, and conflicts of interest.

Purpose

Survey researchers tend to belong to multiple professional organizations including AAPOR. For example, many belong to the American Sociological Association, American Political Science Association, and the American Statistical Association among others. AAPOR and most other professional organizations have codes of ethics. As such, AAPOR members are affected not only by federal regulation of research behaviors but also by multiple codes of ethics. The various codes are not necessarily similar and the codes may provide conflicting guidance on important research behaviors.

In this paper, I compare the codes of ethics of AAPOR and selected other professional organizations on the three principals of the Belmont Report - respect for individuals, beneficence, and justice. I also compare the codes on the protection of confidentiality of data and conflicts of interest. In addition, the codes will be compared against current federal guidelines on human subjects protections (45CFR46). The analysis is done at the empirical level. That is, the paper presents information about the content of the codes. It does not attempt to understand the underlying practical and applied ethical concepts that were used to create the code.

The following codes and other guidelines are included:

American Association for Public Opinion Research	AAPOR
American Sociological Association	ASocA
American Statistical Association	AStata
American Political Science Association	APSA
Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association	CSAA
American Psychological Association	APA
American Anthropological Association	AAA
American Evaluation Association	AEA
Council of American Survey Research Organizations	CASRO
National Council of Public Polls	NCPP
Marketing Research Association	MRA
Journalism Ethics Codes	
Belmont Report	
Guidelines for IRBs	45CFR46
Declaration of Helsinki	
Nuremberg Code	
OSTP Definition of Research Misconduct	
National Bioethics Advisory Committee Report - 12/00	

These codes were chosen to be illustrative of the variety of approaches professional organizations take toward ethical issues. While the other professional society codes of ethics may not be applicable to all AAPOR members, the codes that contain more guidelines can provide guidance on ethical issues. In addition, since we assume AAPOR members in particular and survey researchers in general attempt to follow ethical procedures, these codes can supplement the guidelines of the Belmont Report and the regulations in 45CFR46 in understanding human research protections. In the following analysis, I use the Belmont report as the basis for understanding the protection of human participants in survey research. I also compare the AAPOR code with other societies' codes.

Many surveys conducted by AAPOR members would not qualify as research that is covered by the Belmont Report and 45CFR46. Both use a limited definition of research - research that is intended for generating new scientific knowledge, such as publications in peer-reviewed journals and presentations at scientific conferences. At the same time, many institutions, (e.g., Indiana University) require that all human participants research be compliant with principles of the Belmont Report.

Principles of the Belmont Report

- ❖ *Respect for persons* - Individuals should be treated as autonomous agents who are capable of deliberation of personal goals and self-determination of participation in research. For the most part, providing complete informed consent and recognizing individuals' rights to privacy demonstrates respect for persons.
- ❖ *Beneficence* - Researchers have first a responsibility to do no or little harm and second to design the research that will maximize benefits relative to the risks of the research. The Report recognizes the complexity of determining who benefits from research.
- ❖ *Justice* - Individuals and groups that benefit from research should also bear the burdens of the research. For example, clinical trials should

not be conducted only with low-income persons who receive health care at publicly subsidized clinics.

Overview of codes of ethics of professional societies

The ethics codes of professional societies differ substantially in their content, focus, and length. Some societies such as AAPOR have very limited codes that describe only a few guidelines. Others such as the American Sociological Association and the American Psychological Association have more lengthy codes that cover more professional activities. Some societies have strong enforcement mechanisms such as the ASocA and APA. AAPOR implies that its code is enforced but there are no mechanisms described for enforcement. Other societies such as AStatA and AAA use their codes as educative tools but do not enforce them.

AAPOR	Primarily a standards code - it describes good practices in survey research	Enforceable but few sanctions
APSA	Academic oriented, e.g., often refers to professors and AAUP	No enforcement procedures
APA	Covers clinical and research activities and professional activities	Detailed enforcement procedures
CSAA	Relatively short and appears written for academics	No enforcement procedures
AStatA	Mixture of guidelines, standards and good practices	No enforcement procedures
ASocA	Covers multiple constituencies (academic, applied) for many research and professional activities	Detailed enforcement procedures
AEA	Focus is limited to good practices and guidelines	No enforcement procedures
AAA	Guidelines oriented, recognizes cross-cultural issues	No enforcement procedures
CASRO	Focuses on survey research activities - research and standards	Not clear from website
MRA	Short document with specific guidelines for limited activities	No enforcement procedures

Respect for Persons - Informed Consent

The AAPOR code is very weak regarding informed consent. No mention of a requirement for informed consent is made in the code. The Belmont Report and 45CFR46 have sufficient guidelines as to what should be included in informed consent. Many of the other professional society codes are also generally clear about the need for informed consent. E.g., the APA, ASocA and the AAA have specific requirements that informed consent be part of all research. They also address issues of informed consent differing for different populations and groups. Some organizations such as the APSA and AEA recognize the need for informed consent but defer to other codes or regulations for specifics.

AAPOR	Silent
APSA	Refers to 45CFR46
APA	Therapy statement and research statement - research statement is fairly clear and requires standard information
CSAA	Required when risks are greater than everyday life but has specific guidelines on how it should be done
AStata	Defers to other organizations
ASocA	Lengthy statement about when informed consent is needed but few specifics
AEA	States it is necessary but defers to other organizations for guidelines
AAA	Strong statement on the need for informed consent while recognizing the complexity of informed consent across cultures
CASRO	Does not have specific statements about informed consent but the code states some of the basic tenets
MRA	Not clear but appears to be a requirement only for interviewing children under age 12

Respect for Persons - Privacy

Seiber (1992) includes the right to privacy as a second area of respect for persons. Privacy is the degree of control research participants can maintain over what researchers know about them. Privacy can be considered as part of the informed consent process in that good informed consent includes information about the uses of the information the participant provides. It further includes statements about the participants' right to give or withhold information.

The Belmont Report states under Respect for Persons that "to show lack of respect for an autonomous agent is to repudiate that person's considered judgments..." which includes both the willingness to volunteer for research and the extent to which the participant is willing to provide information. The Report further states that voluntary participation requires "conditions free of coercion and undue influence."

Privacy includes the right to decline to participate in research. The codes do not address the limits of coercion or persuasion that could be used to encourage individuals to participate in research or to convince participants to provide information they may not wish to share. The ethics codes are generally less detailed about processes for handling instances of declination to participate but most (ASocA, CSAA, APA, AAA, CASRO) contain statements about participation in research as voluntary. Some state that research participants should be told that participation is voluntary. AAPOR is silent on the issue.

The CASRO code is unique in that it states that a second attempt to contact (*not persuade*) an individual to participate is appropriate if the individual was unwilling to participate during the initial contact. However, based on implied meaning of voluntary participation in the professional ethics codes and 45CFR46 and the definition of respect in the Belmont Report, the typical survey research procedure of repeated attempts to convert reluctant respondents is not necessarily congruent with respect for persons.

Beneficence

The Belmont Report is clear that beneficence should apply to both the research participants and to society. It emphasizes "doing no harm" and the need to "maximize possible benefits and reduce possible harms." Codes of ethics vary in their emphasis on beneficence. Most make some mention that research participants should not be harmed or face undue risks (e.g., AStata, APA, AAA, ASocA, and CSAA).

The codes are less clear about the researchers' requirements to evaluate the benefits of research. Perhaps because of a belief that science can be conducted for generating new knowledge alone, scientific societies do not include extensive consideration of benefits of research in their codes. For example, the APA and ASocA indirectly encourage beneficence in their Guiding Principles but not in their guidelines. Three organizations make specific reference to consideration of societal impacts of research. The AStata, AAA, and AEA codes are specific about considering possible harm and benefit to both participants or others when designing and carrying out research. AStata recommends that research designs are adequate for informed decisions and that the results be of practical value. The CSAA explicitly states that researchers must consult with communities and organizations or their leaders to assess the risks and benefits of research.

In survey research, little consideration is given to the risks and benefits to participants because there are relatively few risks. In general, except for privacy or confidentiality problems, surveys have few risks that people do not experience in everyday life. Interestingly, CASRO mentions that long interviews can be a burden and that the research organizations should consider whether the length is necessary to meet the research needs. AStata has statement on excessive imposition of time with surveys. AAPOR is silent on the issue of beneficence.

Justice

The issue of justice is generally more relevant to biomedical than social research. Typical survey research procedures using various forms of random sampling generally include a diverse group of participants. Due to the nature of "representative samples" survey researchers attempt to be inclusive. None of the codes appears to consider this issue directly. However, it seems that some codes imply concern for justice in their preambles or guiding principles that contain non-discrimination or inclusivity statements.

Confidentiality of data

The right to privacy implies that when research participants provide information which they believe to be confidential, that information must be kept as confidential by the researchers. Therefore, researchers who promise confidentiality are required to keep the information confidential. The issue of the limits of promised confidentiality is very complex and beyond the scope of this paper. As part of informed consent, 45CFR46 requires a statement about the extent to which confidentiality of records will be maintained. On the Office of Human Research Protections website, their training provides a little additional detail but is not explicit about how confidentiality should be maintained. The Belmont Report is silent on the issue.

The codes are not consistent in their expectations for maintaining confidentiality. A rough taxonomy of how the various professions might be a) those that make blanket statements about absolute confidentiality, b) those that recognize that it might not be possible for multiple reasons to achieve absolute confidentiality, and c) those that promote thoughtful methods for handling issues related to confidentiality of private information.

The AAPOR code requires absolute confidentiality unless waived by the respondent. The code would not allow researchers to reveal life-threatening, illegal, or abusive situations if discovered in an interview. It would prevent disclosure even under subpoena. The AAA and APA recognize that confidentiality is not absolute even under the promises of it. The AAA code states the confidentiality information may inadvertently be disclosed even under the best of conditions. The APA recognizes the right of judicial system to obtain confidential information.

In contrast organizations such as the ASocA describe in more detail the conditions under which confidentiality is required. Their code states that researchers have a responsibility to discuss limits of confidentiality if they are not willing to provide complete confidentiality. It also requires that if the limits are not discussed, then absolute confidentiality is implied. For survey researchers, it means they would not reveal information even under subpoena unless they stated in informed consent that they were not willing to protect the information if required by a court. Their code also allows for confidentiality to be waived if the researcher discovers life- or health-threatening activities.

AAPOR	Complete confidentiality unless respondent waives it
APSA	Requires researchers to know the laws regarding the limits of confidentiality and to disclose them to participants
APA	The code has both clinical and research statements which appear to allow disclosure of confidential information as mandated by law; encourages full discussion of limitations of confidentiality
CSAA	Does not have a strong statement and encourages report of abusive behaviors
AStata	Advises researchers to be aware of legal limitations and do not promise confidentiality if it cannot be maintained
ASocA	Advises researchers to promise only what willing to do, even if against law; exceptions for the discovery of life- and health-threatening behavior
AEA	Defers to the standards of other societies
AAA	Advises researchers to discuss the level with participants and to attempt to comply with it but allows that disclosure may happen
CASRO	Lengthy statement - mostly about permission for data linkage; suggests researchers take reasonable steps to resist legal requests
MRA	Complete confidentiality unless respondent waives it

The variety of approaches to the protection of confidential information may cause the most problems for survey researchers, especially when the codes provide insufficient guidance. The issue is complex and the legal and ethical rules are generally inadequate for complete protection of both the participants and the researchers.

Conflicts of interest

In biomedical research, conflicts of interests, especially financial conflicts of interest are very contentious. Scientists are concerned that conflicts of interest could affect the collection and analysis of data. The impact may be quite subtle, so ethics codes recommend that apparent conflicts of interest be made public or that the members remove themselves from conflict of interest situations. Social scientists are less affected financial conflicts of interest. Rather, conflicts of interest arise more often from dual professional relationships than from financial conflicts of interest.

In general, the codes contain statements on conflicts of interest. The ASocA has an extensive description of potential conflicts of interest. The APA has statement prohibiting dual relationships which are essentially conflicts of interest. AStatA requires that conflicts of interest be stated and resolved. AEA requires disclosure of conflicts of interest. CASRO interestingly has a statement about bribery and gifts to clients which might be considered a form of conflict of interest. APSA mentions that nepotism rules should be abolished and only conflicts of interest rules should govern professional relationships.

The conduct of survey research rarely involves conflicts of interest and the AAPOR code does not address the issue. Rather, other areas of professional activity are where conflicts of interest arise. The peer review process, the review of research proposals, and support letters can be influenced by conflicts of interest. As such, it is likely that AAPOR members will face these issues in contexts other than their roles as survey researchers.

Discussion

Despite the growth in regulation governing research activities over the past decade, there do not appear to be major inconsistencies among the various regulating bodies. Rather, it appears that the codes and other guidelines provide some but not always adequate guidance on standards, research protections, and professional activities. Fortunately, the various codes I examined do not appear to be contradictory. While there are certainly more ethics codes that apply to survey researchers, it seems unlikely that they would differ substantially from those included in this paper.

The AAPOR code of ethics provides good advice on standards but weak advice on research protections and professional activities. This approach is understandable because of the practical difficulties of creating a code that would be useful and followed by diverse membership that represents many disciplines and professions. Similar multi-disciplinary societies that foster the mixing of disciplines such as the Population Association and the Gerontological Society do not have codes. For these societies, the assumption is that members are also members of other professional associations related to their primary disciplines.

As a profession, survey research does not appear to experience many ethical problems in the conduct of research. While many organizations do not follow all the requirements for informed consent stated in 45CFR46, the nature of survey research is such that the risks are not great and that participants quite often decline to participate. Survey researchers are very similar to other social science researchers in that they hold ethical considerations

important in their research design and for most designs the risks are minimal, so little harm can come from the research.

In this paper, I reviewed the various reports, codes, and regulations for similarities and differences on four issues related to the conduct of surveys along with the issue of conflicts of interest. The professional society codes of ethics chosen were those of social science and research organizations. The paper did not include codes of ethics related to journalism. A cursory reading of journalists' codes of ethics indicates that journalists use different standards on issues such as privacy based on their beliefs in freedom of the press. Journalists tend to have stricter standards on conflicts of interest.

The paper did not address the issues of the responsible conduct of research (RCR). Last December, the Office of Science and Technology Policy released a statement on responsible conduct of research. This statement clarified earlier federal regulations on issues such as the falsification and fabrication of data and plagiarism. RCR is more difficult to regulate because research misconduct is less obvious than ethical misconduct. An interesting project would be to look for evidence of RCR in survey research.

Over the next few years, increased regulation of research activities by various government agencies is likely. Within research organizations such as universities and large research companies, internal review will be more detailed to meet increased monitoring by federal agencies. Professional societies are developing more explicit standards for a variety of professional activities. In this environment, it becomes more important for survey researchers to be aware of the changing norms of accepted ethical behavior and the increasing regulation of it. Fortunately, substantial agreement exists among the regulations and codes. And, perhaps more importantly, these guidelines are consistent with good ethical procedures such as those in the Belmont Report.

References:

Codes of Ethics, Related Reports, and US federal government documents. All URLs as of May 11, 2001	
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