Ethics in Market Research: Concerns over Rights of Research Participants

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This paper discusses the growing concern over violation of research ethics relating to deception of research participants, lack of informed consent, and invasion of privacy. The paper highlights the interaction of the three main parties involved in most marketing research: the sponsoring organization (client or user), researcher, and the participant in the survey. It focuses attention on the rights and obligations involved in the relationship between the researcher and participant, stressing the importance of moral behaviour and ethical values of research in collecting data from participants.

1. Introduction

Ethical research questions are sometimes raised due to unclear behavioral expectations and moral responsibilities of marketing researchers who interact with respondents to collect and analyze marketing data, and report findings to their clients. In fact, the rights and obligations of the researcher (or fieldworker), client, and the respondent are usually dictated by societal norms, which represent codes of behavior, suggesting what members of the society ought to do under given circumstances (Zikmund, 2003).

Certain ethical behaviour is normally expected from researchers when they deal with respondents. For example, an ethical issue is raised when a researcher believes he/she has the right to seek certain information, such as consumer income or spending on certain products, while a respondent feels that this is an invasion of privacy, thus does not respond to similar questions, or even refuses to participate in the whole survey.

In general, some scholars believe that writing on the subject of research ethics is often frustrating because of four reasons (Bryman and Bell, 2007):

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1) Writers differ widely on ethical issues in research. They often disagree on what is and is not ethically acceptable in social research.
2) The main elements in the debate over ethical research have not changed for the past fifty years.
3) Debates about research ethics emphasized certain extreme cases of alleged ethical transgression, while in fact the potential for unethical research is much larger.
4) Some cases of unethical research are often associated with particular research methods, such as disguised observation and deception in experiments. In fact, the ethical question resides particularly with the intentional misuse of these methods.

Obviously, ethical issues can be raised throughout all phases of research, notably problem definition, stating research objectives/hypotheses, literature review, choice of research design, questionnaire design, data collection procedures, data editing and cleaning, choice of statistical methods, data analysis, conclusions and recommendations, and even referencing.

This paper addresses the growing concern over violation of research ethics relating to rights of human subjects in fieldwork, notably the right to informed consent; right to privacy and confidentiality; and right not to be deceived or harmed as a result of participation in the research. It should be noted that these ethical areas can somehow overlap, such as deceiving a respondent by not informing him/her about the true purpose of the research. Nevertheless, these three areas may represent a useful classification to start the discussion.

2. The right to be informed (informed consent)

The ethical issue involved in respondent's right to be informed varies, depending on whether the respondent is knowledgeable enough about the nature of research, and the implications of his/her participation in the survey. It means that a participant understands the purpose of the research, and consequently waives his/her right to privacy by agreeing to participate in a survey (Zikmund, 2003). But this, does not obviously waive the right to confidentiality and anonymity. That is, an individual, who volunteers to participate in a survey, still has the right to expect his/her answers and identity to remain confidential and safeguarded. This implies that if respondent's personal details, such as name and address, are revealed to the researcher, this information should be safeguarded against use by the sponsoring organization, or even any third party, under any circumstances.
The notion of informed consent also implies that a participant is must be fully informed, presumably at the very beginning of an interview, about the survey process itself, such as using certain observation equipments or recording devices (Bryman and Bell, 2007). For example, the AOM (American Academy of Management) code of ethical conduct states that:

"It is the duty of Academy members to preserve and protect the privacy, dignity, well being, and freedom of research participants. This duty requires both careful research design and informed consent from all participants. ... Informed consent means explaining to potential participants the purpose and nature of research so they can freely choose whether or not to become involved. Such explanations include warning of possible harm and providing explicit opportunities to refuse to participate and to terminate participation at any time. Because students and employees are particularly subject to possible coercion, even when unintended, special care must be taken in obtaining their informed consent".

Unfortunately, the principle of informed consent is often violated in research studies, presumably to maximize chances for obtaining critical information, avoid getting into certain problems, or gain access to certain kinds of settings. Critics argue that lack of informed consent may occur in cases where participants belong to certain groups in the society, such as the poor, the old, the less educated, who are often unaware of their rights to choose. They also argue that, in some cases, interviewers begin with unclear explanation of the purpose of the survey, followed by some attractive, yet irrelevant, questions to create a relaxing atmosphere, and then move to private questions (Zikmund, 2003). This seems to overlap between lack of informed consent and violation of privacy. Deception can also be perceived. Despite the widespread condemnation of the 'lack of informed consent, however, some scholars argue for the logic of "end-justifies-means" in certain research settings, where obtaining essential information is considered almost impossible with informed consent (Erikson, 1967). Supporters of this view draw on a leading study by Dalton (1959), which did not reveal the true purpose of the study in order to obtain critical information about an unofficial use of resources and illegitimate organizational behaviour.

Clearly, the above argument suggests violation of the "informed consent principle" can sometimes be justified in view of the importance and urgency to get the required information or access certain settings. However, this view seems to be dangerous as it neglects well-established academic tradition of
keeping the public well-informed, and also does not seem to be universally accepted in marketing research.

3. The Right to privacy and confidentiality

Privacy is an area of ethical concern in marketing research. Individual's right to privacy is an ethical value in itself. It means that an individual has the right to choose whether to participate in a survey, or even respond to certain questions on whatever ground he/she feels is justified. Any transgression of this right in the name of research is not acceptable in the research community. Personal or seemingly intrusive information should never be solicited, and if it is absolutely necessary and linked to the nature of research, it should be dealt with high sensitivity to the respondent, offering enough justification for this information, and linking it to the informed consent principle, giving an opportunity to withdraw (Sekaran, 2003). The MRS (Market Research Society) code of ethical conduct states that:

"The objectives of any study do not give researchers a special right to intrude on a respondent's privacy nor to abandon normal respect for an individual's values."

The MRS also recognizes that, although some research topics can be generally considered as sensitive to respondents, it is often difficult for researchers to judge beforehand which subjects can be sensitive to certain individuals. This suggests that generalization can not be made across the board, and that case sensitivity can be judged individually, offering respondents the right to withdraw at any time. Another aspect of the privacy is whether a phone call is considered an intrusion to a person's privacy, particularly during an important meeting, holiday, private business, or other affairs of personal nature. In fact, this is a debatable issue in marketing research, as a field interviewer does not usually know, in advance, if an individual is in a mood of taking phone calls. The debate continues over computerized phone calls (Junk phone calls). In fact, the boundaries between an intrusive and convenient phone call are often blurred. Generally, common courtesy can be observed by field interviewers (i.e. avoid calling too earlier in the day or too later in the evening). Furthermore, recording private behavior with hidden devices (i.e a camera and/or microphone) is considered a gross violation of an individual's right to privacy (i.e. observing people in fitting rooms through a one-way mirror).
The issue of privacy is always linked to confidentiality and anonymity in marketing research, particularly in the context of harm to participants. For example, the BSA (British Sociological Association) code of ethical conduct states that:

"The anonymity and privacy of those who participate in the research process should be respected. Personal information concerning research participants should be kept confidential. In some cases, it may be necessary to decide whether it is proper or appropriate to record certain kinds of sensitive information".

4. Deception and harm

Deception and harm represent another area of ethical concern in marketing research. Deception occurs when a field interviewer misrepresents the true purpose of research. In some cases, a researcher tries to create a false impression by disguising the real objective of the survey in order to obtain important information. Bluntly stated, the researcher lies to participants to obtain information he/she could not otherwise obtain. For example, in a study of small businesses by Holliday (1995), the researcher pretended that she was a student, interested in the subject of small firms, in order to obtain critical information about a competitor's product. Obviously, the researcher was involved in deception, which also represented harm to participants. In this context, the AOM (Academy of Management) code of ethical conduct clearly states that:

"Deception should be minimized, and, when necessary, the degree and effects must be mitigated as much as possible. Researchers should carefully weigh the gains achieved against the cost in human dignity. To the extent that concealment or deception is necessary, the researcher must provide a full and accurate explanation to participants at the conclusion of the study, including counseling, if appropriate".

Some scholars (for example, Bryman and Bell, 2007) argue for some degree of concealment, based on the ground that it is not always feasible, nor technically possible, to provide participants with a totally complete and detailed account of what the research is about, as illustrated by the example of Lee's research (1998). In general, Zikmund (2003) argues that deception can be justified only in cases where no physical or psychological harm will be caused, and the researcher takes personal responsibility to inform
participants about the concealment or deception at the conclusion of the study. The MRS (Market Research Society) code of ethics says that:

"The researcher must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that respondents are in no way directly harmed or adversely affected as a result of their participation in a marketing research project".

The issue of harm involves any physical or psychological harm, including harm to self-esteem, stress, future employment, etc. This should also be linked to the principle of 'informed consent', as discussed earlier.

Below is a good example of code of research ethics adopted by the IUP (Indiana University of Pennsylvania), which demonstrates institutionalized guidelines of researcher's ethical responsibilities toward human subjects in research:

5. IUP Statement of Individual Research Ethics

The decision to conduct research should rest upon a considered judgment by the investigator as to the relative contributions of the research activities pondered and their concomitant risks to human subjects. Researchers should thus carry out their investigations with respect for the people who may choose to participate, their families, cultures, institutions, social systems, and the environment. The principles which follow are intended to explicate the investigator's ethical responsibilities toward human subjects in research.

1. In planning a study, the investigator has the personal responsibility to make a careful evaluation of its ethical acceptability, taking into account the previously described principles for research with human subjects. To the extent that this appraisal, weighing scientific and humane values, suggests a deviation from any principle, the investigator incurs an increasingly serious obligation to seek ethical advice and to observe more stringent safeguards to protect the rights of the human research subjects.

2. Responsibility for the establishment and maintenance of acceptable ethical practice in research always remains with the individual investigator. The investigator is also responsible for the ethical treatment of the research subjects by collaborators, assistants, students, and employees, all of whom, however, incur parallel obligations.
3. Ethical practice requires the investigator to inform subjects of all features of the research that reasonably might be expected to influence willingness to participate and to explain all other aspects of the research about which the subjects inquire. Openness and honesty are essential characteristics of the relationship between investigator and research subjects. When the methodological requirements of a study necessitate concealment or deception, the investigator is required to ensure subjects' understanding of the reasons for this action. Such deception or concealment increases the investigator's responsibility to protect the welfare and dignity of the research subjects.

4. Ethical research practice requires the investigator to respect the individual's freedom to decline to participate in research or to discontinue participation at any time. The obligation to protect this freedom requires special vigilance when the investigator is in a position of power over the subjects. A decision to limit this freedom increases the investigator's responsibility to protect the subjects' dignity and welfare.

5. The ethical investigator must maintain a clear separation of roles between that of researcher and any other position, on campus as well as off campus, that impinges on the study.

6. Ethically acceptable research begins with the establishment of a clear and fair agreement between the investigator and the research subjects that clarifies the responsibilities of each. The investigator has the obligation to honor all promises and commitments included in that agreement.

7. The ethical investigator protects subjects from physical and mental discomfort, harm, and danger. If the risk of such consequences exists, the investigator is required to inform the subjects of that fact, secure consent before proceeding, and take all possible measures to minimize distress. A research procedure may not be used if it is likely to cause serious and lasting harm to subjects.

8. After the data are collected, ethical practice requires the investigator to provide the subjects with a full clarification of the nature of the study and to remove any misconceptions that may have arisen. Where scientific or humane values justify delaying or withholding information, the investigator acquires a special responsibility to assure that there are not damaging consequences for the subjects.

9. Where research procedures may result in undesirable consequences for the subjects, the investigator has the responsibility to detect and remove or correct these consequences, including, where relevant, long-term aftereffects.
10. Information obtained about the research subjects during the course of an investigation is confidential. When the possibility exists that others may obtain access to such information, ethical research practice requires that this possibility, together with the plans for protecting confidentiality, be explained to the subjects as a part of the procedure for obtaining informed consent.

6. Conclusions and Implications

In view of the discussion of marketing research ethics relating to researcher's ethical responsibilities toward human subjects in research, it seems likely that there are unethical researchers who, intentionally or unintentionally, ignore well-established research ethics toward respondents in surveys. Marketing researchers are no different from other people in business for that matter. Even good researchers may sometimes choose to take shortcuts under certain circumstances, some of which are ethically unclear.

Observance of universally accepted ethical standards in marketing research should receive more attention in the research community, particularly when dealing with human subjects in fieldwork. In some institutions (i.e. Indiana University of Pennsylvania), for example, a researcher, applying for a research grant or support, must fill in and sign an official form relating to guidelines of researcher's ethical responsibilities toward human subjects in research before starting a research project. This means that the researcher takes personal responsibility for any violation of research ethics for that matter. Clearly, this represents a model for well institutionalized practice of ethical research.

Future research efforts can focus attention other aspects of ethical research, such as researcher's moral obligations in other aspects of the research process.

References


BSA (British Sociological Association): (www.britsoc.co.uk/new_site/index.php?area=equality&id=63)

MRS (Market Research Society): (www.mrs.org.uk/standards/codeconduct.htm)