

Organizational Survey Research: A Multifaceted Ethical Assessment
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The use of organizational survey research is not new. However, when information is collected that is not directly related to a job analysis such as demographic and bio-data (employee attitudes, beliefs, interests, values, behaviors, and experiences), it can almost always be viewed as intrusive, and ethical considerations must be weighed (Watson, 1996). As an organizational survey researcher, it is important to understand and honor all of the ethical commitments made by engaging in research with human subjects and the data collected from them (Fowler, 2013). The Council of American Survey Research Organizations' Code of Standards and Ethics for Survey Research outlines four ethical commitments or responsibilities for survey researchers to uphold: responsibility to respondents; responsibility to clients; responsibility in reporting to clients and the public; and responsibility to outside contractors and interviewers (CASRO, 2013).

When conducting organizational survey research, the above-mentioned responsibilities remain valid and a responsibility to respondents (employees) is paramount. To ensure validity of results and to uphold a survey researcher's ethical obligation to the employees in the survey, the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (2013) and Molonsky & Waller (2015) mandate that all employees must be: willing participants, informed of the intentions of the research and how the information and responses will be used, treated respectfully, and finally, as in the case with all social research, the researcher must avoid and minimize any risks (Fowler, 2013). However, as is too often the case in organizations, managers may force participation, and all employees know that failure to comply will have consequences and that they will likely be seen as uncooperative (Borgatti & Molina, 2005).

One of the most protective measures an organizational survey researcher can take to protect the employees is to ensure anonymity, or at least, the confidentiality of the sensitive data collected. Borgatti & Molina (2005) succinctly state: “The single most powerful device for protecting research subjects (and the quality of data) in any survey research is anonymity. If respondents do not have to reveal their identity at any time, their protection is, in principle, guaranteed, and they can feel free to give truthful answers. If employees feel free of any repercussions, it follows that a survey would also yield higher response rates, thus helping to increase the validity of the study. Unfortunately, when organizational survey research is conducted within a small or medium sized organization, anonymity may be an unattainable goal due to the smaller number of subjects the organization could provide and the relative proximity to which they all work. Even with anonymity, the chance of an upset manager lashing out at an entire division over unfavorable results can be another cause for concern (Borgatti & Molina, 2005). It is important as an organizational survey researcher to try to ensure that employees are in fact taking the survey free of duress and being treated respectfully while doing so.

Navigating the complex environment that many organizations present is a balancing act for the researcher, who must uphold a commitment to the respondents and minimize harm, while also understanding that there are commitments to the client (the organization that has retained or employed the survey researcher). Often, decisions may be made from the results of organizational survey research that in fact do harm to the respondents (terminations, demotions, layoffs). To help address how the survey research data will be used and in an effort to prevent unscrupulous behaviors or activities that

result from the survey research data, a management disclosure contract (MDC) should be created (Borgatti & Molina, 2005). The MDC will also serve to ensure that the survey respondents are well informed of the intentions of the survey while also maintaining responsibility to the client. The management disclosure contract should be a document signed by both the researcher and the client for whom the research is performed. Borgatti and Molina stress that “This document should explicitly state what data the organization is entitled to and what decisions will be made from the survey research data. It is, of course, exceedingly difficult to write these in a way that organizations will accept. The reality is that it is the organizations that have the power, not the researchers (2005). It is again important for the survey researcher to ensure a comfort with the parameters of the management disclosure contract and understanding of the commitments to both parties. The management disclosure contract should be included with the signed consent form each respondent receives, outlining the confidentiality agreement and scope of influence the survey research will have. Again, by thoroughly informing the survey respondents of the survey researchers intentions, respondents will be more likely to answer truthfully and more likely to successfully complete the survey, thus increasing validity and the response rate.

An organizational survey researcher’s responsibility to the client is deeper than merely documenting who will receive what information and what can be done with it. The Council of American Survey Research Organizations identifies three core tenets of an organizational survey researcher’s responsibility to clients.

The first core tenet is to ensure that the relationship between the researcher and the client is one that fosters confidence and mutual respect, characterized by honesty and confidentiality (CASRO, 2013).

The second core tenet of a survey researcher when conducting organizational survey research is to assist in the creation of effective and efficient studies, voicing any concerns about the value of all items included in the study. Voicing concerns of the validity of survey questions and discussing what information will be obtained from the questions can help to ensure the relevance of the survey to the sample and should increase the response rate while also maximizing the benefit of the organizational survey research. Furthermore, the organizational survey researcher must then conduct the agreed upon study, only changing any aspect after promptly reviewing it with the client. An organizational survey researcher should also allow the client to verify that all work was performed properly and according to the standards of the practice. Finally, an organizational survey researcher will hold confidential all information obtained as a result of organizational survey research about general business operations and research projects of the client; for research findings obtained by the researcher or that are deemed to be the property of the client, the survey researcher must make no public release of finding without expressed prior consent from the client (CASRO, 2013).

The third core tenet listed by The Council of American Survey Research Organizations (2013) is about bribery and is worth stating verbatim:

Bribery in any form and in any amount is unacceptable and is a violation of a research organization's fundamental, ethical obligations. A research organization and/or its principals, officers and employees should never give gifts to clients in the form of cash. To the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations, a research organization may provide nominal gifts to clients and may entertain

clients, as long as the cost of such entertainment is modest in amount and incidental in nature.

The ambiguity of the final sentence of The Council of American Survey Research Organizations tenet on bribery “To the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations, a research organization may provide nominal gifts to clients and may entertain clients, as long as the cost of such entertainment is modest in amount and incidental in nature” (2013) is a cause for concern. An organizational survey researcher should ensure not only familiarity with the state laws where the research is conducted, but also maintain good values and judgment when providing nominal gifts or entertainment services to clients. (Beier and Young, 1998; Gerig, 2004) This will ensure the relationship between the researcher and the client is one that fosters confidence and mutual respect, characterized by honesty and confidentiality.

The third ethical commitment outlined by The Council of American Survey Research Organizations (2013) is a responsibility in reporting to clients and the public. This responsibility is centered on the idea that the survey researcher is obligated to provide accurate portrayals of the survey research data, and the researcher must make careful checks to ensure accuracy and minimize error. Another component of an organizational survey researcher’s responsibility is to report survey research data findings and specific details on what should be in the report to the client

Included in the client’s report should be the name of the client, the name of the organizational survey researcher, the purpose of the study, specific study objectives, the dates the data for the study was collected, an explanation and the method explaining the selection of the sampling frame used, screening criteria enacted, a quantitative report on total number sampled (including total number sampled, total not reached, refusals,

terminations, and non-eligibles), descriptions of all statistical procedures, clearly marked statistical tables, and most importantly copies of the exact questionnaire, visual exhibits, interviewer directions, codebooks or any other important papers (CASRO, 2013).

When reporting to the general public, it is an organizational survey researcher's responsibility to provide at the minimum the sponsor of the study, the purpose of the study, the sample description and size, dates of data collection, the name of the survey researcher, the questions asked, information regarding sampling error, and any other information an average person would need to draw conclusions from the study (CASRO, 2013).

Finally, as it relates to organizational survey research, an organizational survey researcher reserves the right to view any statement made by the client using the data as a citation to ensure the data is being portrayed accurately. If the survey researcher feels that the client is misrepresenting or distorting the data, the survey researcher is then obligated to release all necessary data to make the proper clarifications (CASRO, 2013).

The fourth ethical responsibility as outlined by The Council of American Survey Research Organizations (2013) is only applicable when an organizational survey researcher employs the use of subcontractors on interviewers and expressly forbids asking them to engage in any activity that organizational survey researcher themselves would not engage in, in accordance with their prior ethical commitments.

Adherence to these ethical responsibilities in an organizational atmosphere can be turbulent. The real world pressures of an organization can be massive, and stress can be high, especially when complex forces and attitudes are being uncovered. It is important for organizational survey researchers to remain objective and uphold their responsibilities

to their research participants and their clients. Understanding how to balance an organizational survey researcher's multiple commitments can be tough, but by following this blueprint, a researcher will lay a refined foundation on which ethical principles can be built.

References

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