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Anonymous Source of Data

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Anonymous Source of Data

Abstract

Academic writers have the ethical responsibility to protect their sources of data, to inform participants of how personal information will be secured, and to inform participants when anonymity cannot be safeguarded. The informed consent document, reviewed prior to data collection, conveys the appropriate information to potential participants. In this way, participants understand whether or not they will be identifiable and how this affects their decision to participate. This entry elaborates on these three points.

Disciplines

Communication

Comments

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Academic writers have the ethical responsibility to protect their sources of data, to inform participants of how personal information will be secured, and to inform participants when anonymity cannot be safeguarded. The informed consent document, reviewed prior to data collection, conveys the appropriate information to potential participants. In this way, participants understand whether or not they will be identifiable and how this affects their decision to participate. This entry elaborates on these three points.

Responsibility to protect sources coincides with the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice as set forth in the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research's 1979 report *Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research*, commonly called the Belmont Report. These protections were designed to eliminate or minimize negative consequences to participants for engaging in the research process. These procedures are reviewed by Institutional Review Boards at organizations that conduct research. Researchers carefully evaluate how they will inform participants of how their information will be kept anonymous. Several procedures are listed here:

1. Do not ask for name, address, date of birth, Social Security number, or phone number. If names are needed to link data to their sources, ask the participant to provide a pseudonym. If an age is needed, ask for the age (not date of birth).
2. Have participants acknowledge acceptance of an informed consent document without providing a name. In online surveys, participants can read an informed consent document and click on the I Agree or I Disagree button. In this way, the researcher has a record of respondents' consent, but cannot link individuals' data to any identifying information.
3. When a signed informed consent form is collected, separate the form from the participants' data as soon as possible or collect the consent forms separately from or prior to distribution of the data collection instrument or outset of an experiment.
4. If an e-mail address is requested for a follow-up interview or compensation, make sure the information is separated from the data as soon as possible. Two electronic surveys can be sequenced such that a second survey can capture identifying information without connecting individuals to data in the first survey. Data reports often appear in spreadsheet form. Thus, if identifiable information is connected to the data, a column can be selected, cut, and pasted into a new data file, separating the information from the data.

Researchers also have the responsibility to inform participants of how personal information will be secured. A common practice to protect sources of data is to use pseudonyms. Writing an excerpt from an interview can be challenging without using names, places, or other identifiers mentioned by the participants. Some of these clues, such as names of employers, companies employed, relational partners, or street names, for example, could help the sleuth reader detect who participants are. For example, David McMahan wrote an ethnographic essay about his experience working as a bartender/bouncer in a rural tavern. At the time of publication, McMahan worked at Missouri Western State University in St. Joseph, Missouri, a small city less than one hour from where I was raised. As I read the article, the setting was clearly a typical, small, Midwest community. As I read more details, I began to picture a local tavern I was familiar with in a community close to St. Joseph. Upon meeting McMahan at a conference, I asked if he had worked at the tavern I was thinking of. Whether the answer was yes or no, McMahan protected his source by replying that it was not. The description could apply to any number of establishments, but I couldn't help but ponder the challenges to the

ethnographer and qualitative researcher of trying to create the setting for the reader while simultaneously protecting the source of the data.

Quantitative researchers also have methods to protect their sources. While much of their data is collected absent any personal, identifying information, they also utilize practices to keep their participants protected while also providing readers with a snapshot of a typical respondent. Using descriptive statistics, quantitative researchers aggregate data from individual respondents and provide characteristics of the sample using frequencies or percentages. For example, a colleague and I studied sexual communication of married persons. This highly sensitive subject makes recruitment difficult, and a survey provided a means to collect information without knowing the identity of any of the participants. However, readers are usually interested in characteristics of the sample to understand to whom the findings could be generalized. To that end, our studied included 293 individuals, of whom 58% were female and 42% were male; the average length of marriage was 13.7 years with a range of 1 month to 54 years, and the average age was 40 years, with a range of 20–73 years. These brief descriptors paint a fuzzy picture of who responded to the survey and who the data represent.

A disadvantage of anonymous sources of data is that those sources may be influenced by social desirability or they may engage in deception with its range of white lies to bald-face lies. Indeed, if the source trusts the shielding of information, participants can say whatever they want. This possibility subjects the data to questions of validity and reliability.

There are genres of writing where protecting sources of data is the antithesis of credible writing. Rhetoricians, for example, rely heavily on the credibility of their sources when establishing their arguments. Indeed, the quality of the manuscript relies, in part, on the sources named in the manuscript.

Tina A. Coffelt

See also [Confidentiality and Anonymity of Participants](#); [Human Subjects, Treatment of](#); [Informed Consent](#); [Privacy of Information](#)

Further Readings

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- human subjects
- institutional review board
- anonymity
- personal information

- informed consent
- Missouri
- protection

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