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Ethical aspects of experimental research on the internet

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Abstract

The article is a theoretical reflection on an extremely important and crucial aspect of any type of research – the ethical aspect. This paper contains the basic assumptions contained in the most commonly cited ethical codes used by different research environments. Particular emphasis was placed on the ethics of research preparation such as the technical and substantive readiness of the experimenter to cope with the undertaken tasks.

Keywords*:* social studies, ethics of research, experiment, research through the internet.

When considering experimental studies it is impossible not to mention ethical issues. The Internet as a medium of particular specificity requires even more careful analysis over the ethical aspects conducted through its actions.

Conversely, the fact of public and open research seems to provide better control of ethical standards. However, an apparent easiness and general accessibility, as well as provided tools create the temptation of fast and convenient data collection, particularly for less experienced researchers. This situation may result in an increased risk of fraud or omissions in the sphere of ethics. It is not about blatant misconduct as in the case of Philip Zimbardo's prison experiment or research on obedience to Stanley Milgram's authorities, known from textbooks of psychology or sociology (Strelau, 2007; Zimbardo, & Gerrig, 2012). Ethical issues mentioned in this report are certainly much more subtle, and thus in many cases ignored.

Various individual researchers own environmental documents regulating the conduct of research, such as the *Code of professional ethics for the psychologist* (1992), the *International Code of Market Research and Social Studies* (1994). However, in most cases matters of studies using the new media, are cited only occasionally, or not at all. For this reason, among experts in the field there are ongoing discussions on the suitability of transferring research principles of "real" life onto "online" conditions. Regardless of the outcome of these disputes, it is worth considering ethical issues in both "traditional" as well as more general terms, taking into account the specific nature of the Internet.

The issue of research ethics can be viewed in two ways. The first, classic and standard, focuses primarily on respect of the rights of participants in the experiment. Its basic principle is contained in the letter "Do not harm the respondents" (Babbie, 2006, p.516). This approach is found primarily in the codes of various communities of researchers: PTP, OFBOR, etc. (*Code of professional ethics for the psychologist*, 1992; *International Code on Market an Social Research*, 1994).

The other method, however, must constantly recognize the importance of responsibility for the whole experimental process. From this point of view the only experiment that can be approved as ethical is one that apart from ensuring a proper relationship with the person tested combined with respect for their rights, also meets the criteria for a reliable, well-developed scientific study. A scientist, especially in the social sciences, has to consistently realize the importance of actions undertaken, as well as the results obtained and their conclusions. It is a basic matter and yet by some scholars far too rarely respected. Therefore, ethical research is a study conducted with diligence - otherwise the results would be unreliable, which questions the sense of time and work done by the people examined in part in the experiment.

The question that arises here is what precautions must be taken in order to fulfill such broadly defined ethical recommendations. The experimenter must, first of all, accept and implement a set of rules designed to care for the person tested. The main aim is to make every effort to ensure that the participant in the experiment remains in at least comparable mental health before and after the test. The recommendations refer here to a few key areas: the consent to the test, the test procedure, and the use of the information gathered.

Earl Babbie, writing about ethics in social research (Babbie, 2006), as a first principle classified voluntary participation. In case of experimental procedures, this rule becomes even more important due to the fact that after all the participant responds under experimental impacts, which by definition do not leave the subject without influence on his responses. Participation in the study requires an entity to engage, time, labour, energy, and often also involves the revelation of information, which in other circumstances would not be disclosed by that person. Hence, there is a need to inform the participant about the fact of conducting the study and to obtain consent for such actions - this is reflected in the term "informed consent."

This rule does not diminish even in case of a natural experiment or observational studies when, as it might seem, only the researcher analyzes the data collected. Furthermore, as marked by Robert V. Kozinets (2012) it is necessary to obtain the consent to the inclusion of such information in the research process. "(…) The fact that people are aware of the public appearance of the published content has not yet lead to the automatic conclusion that scientists and other researchers can freely use the data", argued the author (Kozinets, 2012, s.197). This is of particular importance in, for instance, a situation where the researcher intends to use the parts of postings found on the Internet or in reaction to those induced by the investigator and discussed publicly. Risk of identification of the identity of the author by using a pseudonym, jointly with the quote pasted into Google is so large that everybody should agree through informed consent to its use.

Another recommendation, talking about the prohibition of abuse of respondents from the research group, is perhaps the most striking aspect of ethics of experimental research. This raises the need for a thorough examination by the investigator of any possible side effects of the research. Psychology especially is a field in which subjects may be exposed to particular discomfort resulting from participation in some procedures. Incentives such as questions about sensitive, difficult, embarrassing rarely disclosed topics, as well as the impact that can cause dissonance between representation of themselves and the actual reactions under experimental conditions should therefore be used only in justified cases, after a precise analysis of all the possible consequences of psychological and development methods for their minimization. In extreme cases, it may even be necessary to interrupt the experiment due to the bad mental state of a participant.

However, in practice in the case of internet research it is difficult to guarantee the last component of this postulate. The lack of direct relationship with the subject, under experimental distance interactions, prevents accurate understanding of this condition. It is not hard to imagine a situation in which the deficiency of a quick reaction of a researcher at the poor state of a participant triggered by badly designed experimental stimulus could lead to serious negative emotional consequences and stress.

The care for the person tested is also expressed in the recommendation on the anonymity and confidentiality of research results (Babbie, 2006; *Code of professional ethics for the psychologist*, 1992). It does not require extensive explanations. Anonymity aims to provide the assurance that the results are impossible to link with the identity of the subject, even by the implementers of the study. The exception to this rule is, of course, is the individual and group interview. For the purpose of online research, this principle involves, for instance, the necessity to design the software in such a way that the test would be giving the opportunity to send e-mail pooled results (which also follows the recommendations of codes of ethics, but that will be mentioned further in the paper) to prevent the possibility of identification of the people. Therefore, to maintain the great respect to ethics, data on the e-mail addresses should be stored in a different location from the other data from the survey form. In practice, this procedure is extremely rare. In such cases, the more essential becomes the principle of confidentiality. This rule is a guarantee that the researcher will not disclose test results despite the possibility to determine the identity of the participant, as for instance in the case of individual interviews. Earl Babbie (2006) clearly pointed out, however, the need to distinguish between the two terms - is reprehensible to use them interchangeably in the context of the procedure for obtaining informed consent of the participant.

Another type of ethical concern arises from the manner of experimental research on the Internet. There is the risk of depersonalization of the subject. No direct, personal relationship with a participant, usually present in so-called "traditional" experiments, can lead to abuse by the researcher or reduced sensitivity to the needs of the subject, as well as skewing conclusions of the study. It is therefore necessary to design and develop the design of an experimental plan with such care and sensitivity that would provide comfort of the subject examined and give the researchers an opportunity to obtain complete, unrestricted information by the "remote" form of participation.

Another aspect is mentioned in the previous paragraph, the right of a subject to inspect the results sheet. This condition is associated with difficulties that have already been described in the case of internet research. It is common practice to inform participants about the results of the project through e-mail, although the acquisition of their addresses requires additional security preventing the identification of their identity on that basis.

A matter of much controversy is also a concern of betraying the participants. In fact, very often for the benefit of the study at the beginning of it, the experimenter cannot tell the respondents about its purpose. Due to this reason researchers often use the so-called masking instructions (Brzeziński, 1996). This issue appears often in the case of studies of social influence in which the disclosure of the main theme of the experiment stimulates a range of psychological reactions that distort test results. Such misinformation appears also in the research on obedience to authority leading to a possibility of obtaining a negative information about themselves by the participants, which may expose them to serious psychological consequences. Therefore, this type of procedure requires special delicacy and experience to provide a maximum comfort of the subject. Feedback at the end of the experiment must therefore include the explanation of the true purpose of the study and the need of such, and no other disinformation (Brzeziński, 1996).

Another form of hiding the real meaning of the research from the subject group is misleading them about the end of the experiment, while the research continues. This example may be required to provide false feedback as part of an experimental manipulation and observation of the test reaction.

All such activities must be explained and elucidated in the post-experimental procedure, and their application in each case should result from a careful analysis of profit and loss – this is the solution of the here described dilemma of the researcher (Frankfort-Nachmias, & Nachmias, 2001). If the psychological costs of the test are too high, or exceed academic gains, it is not recommended to apply similar methods. It is also clear that the researcher has a responsibility to neutralize any potentially negative effects of both disguise and alias of the truth, as well as the whole experimental procedure. The researcher must therefore make every effort to ensure that the endeavor and perceived stress or discomfort would not affect the mental state of the participant of the experiment (Brzeziński, 2000).

Another example of disguising the truth is the lack of information in accordance with the reality on the form and length of the study. Even adepts with little experience know very well how difficult it is to persuade the participant to participate in a long, tedious task. Therefore, the most common deficiencies in this regard must be concealing or fabricating the information in the initial recruitment call.

The duties of the investigator should also include the dissemination of the information of the possibility of resignation from participation in the experiment at any time, with no reason and without any negative consequences. Due to organizational issues, as well as the convenience of the experimenter, this element is also very often overlooked.

Also the results including their analysis and presentation are itself a subject of ethical reflection. The *Code of Ethics and Professional* Conduct states that: "in imple-

mentation of the social research the psychologist carefully considers the ethical side, especially the possible positive and negative consequences of the available research results and their use in social practice" (*Code of professional ethics for the psychologist*, 1992, p. 5). The researcher is therefore required to ensure the correct interpretation of the results of the study, and to prevent the misuse of it. This can be done by, for instance, taking into account the conclusions about their concerns and the possible existence of alternative hypotheses and interpretations.

However, the wealth, anonymity, confidentiality and the similarities, are not everything. One should also pay attention to the concept of the preparation of research procedures and even earlier, to prepare substantive researchers (Brzeziński, & Toeplitz-Winiewska, 2000). Hastily prepared researches, assembled without knowledge and skills, are getting to the Internet more and more often. Seemingly easy access to the desired group of respondents sometimes leads to - quite accidental or deliberate - ignorance, expressed in haphazardly prepared procedures. Improperly collected data, analyzed without proper grounding, leads to erroneous results and lack of coverage in reality. Detailed criteria for the so-called good of the experimental plan described in more detail by Jerzy Brzeziński (2000) should be a credo of every researcher that takes action in this regard. The experimenter is obliged to maintain correctness in methodological (in the dimension of compliance with the theory, the relevance of the procedures and the adequacy of the statistical model) and psychological (expressed in psychological realism and regular relations between the investigator and subject).

Therefore, the following ethical postulate should be a personal sense of responsibility of the author's research for each stage - so they can confidently admit: "Yes, I have made every effort to ensure that my research has expanded the current state of knowledge in my field".

The abovementioned, however only briefly discussed rules are only a starting point for further reflection and self-analysis of the literature. These regulations determine, or at least should try to prove, standards of research around the world. None of the experiments should see the light of day, unless they meet at least these basic ethical criteria. Particularly experimental studies, specifically those carried out on the Internet, most likely require exceptionally rigorous approach and discipline that might not be as strict when compared with other studies. The specificity of the web means that rules are slightly more difficult to meet than under "traditional" instances. Furthermore, at the same time the web-network as a public medium creates a temptation to evade, especially for young investigators. The illusion of quickly obtaining results on numerous attempts, without having to leave home, contributes to a reduction of scientific value of many promising Master theses or even Doctoral dissertations. Therefore, the demand for an ethical approach that takes into account also the substantive aspect of investigator's preparation is particularly important in this case.

To conclude the above considerations, it is necessary to raise the question of the ethical limits of the research - or rather the limits of the reflection about it. As indicated earlier, the need for applying ethical standards does not end with the provision of respect of the rights of the subject examined - the right to anonymity, informed

consent and its withdrawal, etc. Research ethics is also a responsibility for the entirety of conducted experiments – starting from designing procedures, through its implementation to the dissemination of the results and conclusions. Ethics means to make every effort to implement the best and therefore most reliable execution of the planned experiment. This approach generates the need for strict discipline research that consists of solid scientific expertise and technical skills of the researcher, as well as an ability to resist temptations that might facilitate the work.

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