

A Question About Ethics

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As a person new to research I want to diverge from discussing all things 'fit'. Actually, it is not so much a diversion as it is a solicitation of opinions and insights on one of the most critical issues in the research process. What is of interest is not the general debates regarding appropriate levels of analysis or conceptualization of fit, nor is this paper about the ontological debates as to the appropriateness of one position or another and the subsequent appropriateness of measurement methods (although a clear divide exists on this front between North America and the UK) of fit. Student researchers recognize the importance of ensuring a project is well thought out; however, of panic level concern is whether one can gain access to a sample. No sample equals no data and no data means delays in PhD completion.

It is very clear different approaches are deemed acceptable vs. unacceptable depending where one comes from and as a researcher from Canada studying in the UK I am baffled. With an audience of researchers spanning the globe, it is interesting to understand what is considered ethical and acceptable and why or why not.

A method commonly used in other jurisdictions is the use of incentives and rewards to enhance participation. For example, Aumann (2007), while completing her PhD, which explored expatriates and fit, offered a raffle prize as inducement to Columbia University alumni to participate, Shaffer et al (2006) offered a prize of dinner for four at a top Hong Kong restaurant as a reward for participating. At my alumni university in Canada, university undergraduate students were invited to participate in three psychology experiments or write an essay. All situations are considered acceptable and thus ethical by their respective university.

At my current University in the United Kingdom, inducements such as the aforementioned are frowned upon by the ethics committee. They are implied to be coercive and in an ethical 'grey' area. With substantive proof of the need and efficacy, incentives may be considered but the level of proof required makes using them untenable. By way of example, a colleague was told by members of her sample of British Indians that participation would be extremely low without inducement or acknowledgement of their value to the project. To gain approval to reward participants, the colleague first had to perform a pilot study to prove the sample size would be significantly increased based on the use of an inducement or reward (a small voucher). Now the colleague is months behind. Reasons given are 'it taints your sample'; 'it is coercive'; 'it creates a power imbalance'. The philosophical rationale presented in the PhD skills course was the hypothetical situation; giving money to an alcoholic; the alcoholic would spend it on alcohol.

It seem seems the ethics committee insists on proof from the researcher that they are behaving ethically and that rewards will increase sample size yet not 'taint' it somehow. Is not the accepted practice to disprove in science? That is, should it not be incumbent on the ethics committee to refute the null hypothesis, in this case, 'the researcher behaves in an ethical fashion'? It seems implicit is an insinuation that researchers are inherently unethical; that we are all Pavlovians salivating at the chance to replicate Milgram's study on obedience to authority.

When told that offering incentives or payment ‘taints’ the sample because the motivation becomes money rather than contribution to knowledge, does this not suggest a certain arrogance. Rather, participants recognize that their information and their time to participate in a process has value. Is it not unfair to not reward the participant, the owner of the raw resource i.e. information when everyone else is benefitting? Furthermore, both the researcher and one his supervisors have participated in research in industry where acknowledgement of their effort is the norm. For both, the financial reward was not the motivator; rather, it was an acknowledgement that our participation is valued. Finally, anecdotally, and otherwise, there appears to a sub-population who have never received an invitation to participate in research that they did not accept. Is this not a potential source of bias to research as well...the ‘professional survey taker’?

As developed, my research project focuses at the person level. It is interested in how expatriates interact with their international assignment. Research from both the fit field (Kristof-Brown et al 2005) and the international cross-culture domain (Fontaine, 2008) suggests a cross section of people from different organizations and cultures respectively is important to enhance generalizability. Given this preferred sample strategy, in a recent conversation with a lecturer from Belarus who works at this University and has Russian business connections, this researcher asked him about the potential to interview several Russian businessmen. His immediate response, ‘what is the compensation? They will expect something for their time.’ Given this response, how does one address the clear dilemma?

This paper is interested in gaining a richer understanding of what researchers across the globe consider ethical practice when developing sampling strategies. The sample and access issue is a fundamental issue that all researcher struggle with. Everyone’s thoughts and insights are appreciated.

References

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