The ethics of organizational research: Methodological considerations for ensuring respondents' anonymity and confidentiality

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Abstract

When planning any research in an organization, it is necessary to decide upon the types of personal data to be collected. Ethical research principles suggest that researchers need to ensure participants' anonymity and confidential treatment of their data. However, researchers tend to collect various types of demographic information which might lead participants to believe that their anonymity could be compromised. This article highlights some methodological considerations aimed at ensuring respondents' anonymity and confidential treatment of their data. It also presents two examples which highlight some potential problems that might arise when respondents feel that the anonymity and confidentiality of their data are threatened. Finally, the article proposes specific actions researchers can take to increase participants' trust in them and the employed research designs.

Keywords: organizational research, anonymity, confidentiality

Introduction

When conducting psychological research in organizational settings, we often need to collect demographic information about our participants, such as age, gender, or organizational tenure, in order to be able to test our hypotheses. However, we sometimes collect demographic information even without a specific interest or need. As researchers, we should be aware that our participants might be concerned about the anonymity and confidentiality of their data and that their responses might be influenced by the extent to which they feel anonymity and confidentiality concerns are addressed. In this article, I will first highlight the ethical research principles we should follow in protecting

participant anonymity and confidentiality and I will discuss some methodological considerations aimed at ensuring respondents' anonymity and confidential treatment of their data. Next, I will use two examples to discuss how participant concerns about confidentiality might affect research results. Finally, I will propose some specific actions researchers can take to increase participants' trust in them and the employed research designs.

Ethical aspects of anonymity and confidentiality

In 2005, the European Federation of Psychological Associations (EFPA) proposed a Meta-Code of Ethics which serves as a roadmap for the ethics codes of national psychological associations. One of the four basic ethical principles highlighted in the code centres around *"Respect for Person's Rights and Dignity"*, which, implies respecting individuals' "rights to privacy, confidentiality, self-determination and autonomy" (EFPA, 2005, p. 1). Psychologists are therefore expected to act in accordance with the following rules:

- *"Restriction of seeking and giving out information to only that required for the professional purpose.*
- *Adequate storage and handling of information and records, in any form, to ensure confidentiality, including taking reasonable safeguards to make data anonymous when appropriate, and restricting access to reports and records to those who have a legitimate need to know.*
- *Recognition of the tension that can arise between confidentiality and the protection of a client or other significant third parties"* (EFPA, 2005, p.3).

An overly simplistic conclusion that could be drawn from these rules, is that research in organizations should be completely anonymous, since that would eliminate any possibility of (inadvertently) violating participants' confidentiality. Yet, sometimes, researchers have hypotheses that are specifically related to demographic variables such as, for instance, age, gender, organizational tenure or education. Hence, the following question arises: how can researchers reassure participants that the confidentiality of their data is safeguarded and that their anonymity is protected? One obvious solution is to not record any personal data that is unnecessary for research purposes such as participants' names, addresses and employers. However, this still doesn't address respondents' potential concerns about the anonymity of their responses when it comes to providing information that might be needed for research purposes such as

their age, gender, position, education or tenure, which, in combination, might render them identifiable. In the following sections of this article, I will discuss some possible solutions to ensuring respondents' anonymity while collecting potentially confidential demographic data.

Collection of confidential demographic data while ensuring respondents' anonymity

The most popular solution to collecting demographic data that ensures respondents' anonymity is not to ask about specific values, but rather about ranges of values (Salant & Dillman, 1994). For example, instead of asking *"How old are you?"* we could ask *"Select the age group you belong to"* and propose response ranges (e.g., 21–25, 26–30, 31–35 etc.). The same principle could apply to questions pertaining to tenure, organizational position or educational level. Unfortunately, when the research sample is small, this solution is not necessarily ideal. When dealing with a small research sample, it is worth considering the characteristics of the group as a whole and decide whether specific demographic variables would inadvertently render some respondents identifiable. In addition, it is also worth thinking about whether these variables are indeed informative for research purposes. For instance, if the sample one is studying is relatively homogenous such as a group of nurses which consists of mainly females, asking about participants' gender could render the few male nurses more easily identifiable. In this case, given the gender homogeneity of the sample, collecting data about respondents' gender would also not be informative for research purposes. Given the potential threat to participants' anonymity and the lack of added value for research purposes, researchers might be better served dropping questions related to gender.

Another important factor, that can facilitate the collection of demographic data is the respondents' trust in the researcher and the research procedure. Organizational researchers often believe that it is enough to inform respondents that the collected data will be analysed *"as a whole"* to reduce concerns about anonymity. However, it is not that simple. The respondents may not trust the researcher or even understand what this *"collective data analysis"* means. In addition, they might not believe that superiors or colleagues will not have insight into individual responses. This is especially likely if there are low levels of trust in the organization, employees are aware of various pressures from their superiors and are afraid that the researcher may also succumb to them (Tyler & Degoey, 1996). With this in mind, it is important to try to gain participants' trust and to assure them that their data will be treated confidentially.

In this respect, researchers could benefit from spending some thought on how they design the informed consent form presented to respondents. The informed consent form should use clear, lay language, accurately describe the procedure for collecting and analysing data, clearly specify who has access to the collected data and explain how respondents' data will be treated confidentially to maintain their anonymity. It is also necessary to provide respondents with the opportunity to refuse participation and withdraw from the study at any time, and to provide them with the opportunity to ask questions before consenting to participate (see EFPA Standards for Psychological Assessment, 2013).

How concerns about confidentiality can affect research results

Respondents' lack of trust in the confidentiality of their answers could have varied effects. For instance, they might simply refuse to participate in the study. Or, they may not answer some of the questions, especially those related to demographics. The latter solution is especially probable when respondents fear that refusal to participate in the study might have negative repercussions at work and, therefore, try to protect their anonymity by withholding responses to demographic questions. Alternatively, respondents might answer some of the questions dishonestly, in order to present themselves in a better light. It is worth noting that social desirability biases might lead to positive self-representations, even if respondents feel that the research guarantees the anonymity and confidentiality of their answers.

Below, I will present two examples from actual research illustrating the two potential effects of respondents' lack of trust in the confidentiality of their answers mentioned above: a) respondents refusing to answer demographic questions; and b) respondents answering some of the questions dishonestly.

Example 1: Refusal to answer demographic questions

I will present part of a research study that I carried out in an organization in the healthcare sector in Poland. The study aimed to measure various employee attitudes and behaviours. Management was concerned that employee morale was low and planned to implement activities aimed at increasing employee morale. The effect I will describe below was not expected, but it suggests that the quality of relationships between employees and management might need improvement.

In the study, 92 respondents were asked (among others) to self-categorize into one of three professional groups: medical staff (e.g., doctors, nurses), administrative staff (e.g., secretaries, accountants) and service staff (e.g., cooks, cleaners). They were also asked to provide their age, gender and tenure in the organization. The variables under study were work satisfaction, organizational commitment, work engagement and counterproductive work behaviour (CWB). I measured work satisfaction and CWB with scales used in previous research (see Czarnota-Bojarska, 2015). Organizational commitment was measured with Bańka, Bazińska, and Wolowska's (2002) Polish adaptation of Meyer and Allen's (1991) affective commitment subscale of the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire. Finally, work engagement was measured via the vigour subscale of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Out of the 92 respondents, 19 people did not provide any information regarding their professional group. Out of the remaining respondents, 28 identified themselves as belonging to the medical group, 20 as belonging to the administrative group and 25 as belonging to the service group. Given that such a large percentage of respondents refused to self-categorize into a professional group, I included them as a separate category into the analyses.

The results (see Table 1) suggest that the group of people who did not want to indicate their professional affiliation had the lowest levels of satisfaction, commitment, and engagement. I conducted a series of one-way ANOVAs on levels of satisfaction $F(1,3) = 4.04$, $p = .01$, commitment $F(1,3) = 1.42$, $p = .24$, engagement $F(1,3) = 2.33$, $p = .08$ and CWB $F(1,3) = 2.46$, $p = .07$. Subsequently, I performed Fisher's least significance difference tests to check for intergroup differences. The tests revealed that the group of people who did not want to indicate their professional affiliation showed significantly lower levels of satisfaction and engagement than all the other groups. In addition, the analyses suggested that this group's level of commitment was significantly lower than that of the medical and service groups and that their level of CWB was significantly higher than that of the medical and administrative groups.

Table 1
Means of satisfaction, affective commitment, work engagement and counterproductive work behaviour per professional category

Professional group		Satisfaction	Affective commitment	Work engagement	Counterproductive work behavior
Medical	Mean	4.81	3.13	3.93	1.49
	SD	1.11	0.74	1.22	0.38
	N	28	28	28	28
Administrative	Mean	4.58	2.99	4.26	1.53
	SD	0.79	0.86	0.69	0.53
	N	20	20	20	20
Service	Mean	4.22	3.13	4.08	2.10
	SD	0.78	0.81	0.83	0.51
	N	25	25	25	25
No answer	Mean	3.60	2.62	3.31	1.90
	SD	1.18	0.48	1.15	0.80
	N	19	19	19	19
Total	Mean	4.35	2.99	3.92	1.75
	SD	1.06	0.76	1.05	0.60
	N	92	92	92	92

Of course, the question arises as to why this group of people who chose not to reveal their professional affiliation might differ from the others on a range of variables such as satisfaction, commitment, engagement and CWB. One possible answer might be that these people who are less engaged and satisfied with their work might also not trust the confidentiality of their data. Therefore, they might have chosen not to answer questions that could potentially identify them, as this could entail negative consequences for them in the workplace. In other words, it is possible that this group of people agreed to participate in the study and took the opportunity to honestly convey their attitudes towards their work and their organization, yet, they feared for their anonymity and chose to ignore answering some questions that might identify them.

When considering those that chose to disclose their professional affiliations, one could think of two possible scenarios to explain their answering patterns. One could assume that they did not have concerns about anonymity and answered the questions pertaining to the variables of interest honestly. Or one could assume that they were concerned about their anonymity and chose to answer the questions dishonestly by providing socially desirable answers. Clearly, it is impossible to determine based on this

dataset which interpretation is correct. Nevertheless, it is important for researchers to be mindful about potential reasons that respondents might have for not answering demographic questions.

Example 2: Dishonestly answering some questions

Research that investigates employee behaviours that are beneficial (e.g., organizational citizenship behaviours) or harmful (e.g., counterproductive work behaviours) to the organization can face a number of challenges. For instance, employees might fear disclosing that they engage in behaviours that are harmful to the organization. In addition, social desirability concerns might lead respondents to overclaim engaging in beneficial behaviours and underreport engaging in harmful behaviours.

CWBs are undesirable acts that hinder work, bring measurable social damage, worsen employee relationships, decrease well-being and negatively affect the effectiveness of the organization (e.g., Fox & Spector, 2005). Examples of CWBs are wasting time, gossiping, theft, bending or not following the rules, fraud, and bribery.

Organizational citizenship behaviours (OCBs) are voluntary acts beneficial to the organization and colleagues which are not included in the formal remuneration system (e.g., Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Examples of OCBs are voluntarily helping others with problems at work, encouraging achievement, preventing and resolving conflicts, actively participating in events and changes, being loyal to the organization, and complying with rules.

The question is whether or not self-reports of the types of behaviours described above would systematically affect participants' response patterns. There are at least two possible reasons for this. First, admitting to either beneficial or harmful behaviours can be influenced by social desirability concerns. Generally speaking, people feel more comfortable admitting that they engage in "good" behaviour (see Schlenker, 1980). It can therefore be expected, that people will overreport engaging in OCBs and underreport engaging in CWBs. This problem, however, affects any self-report measures of desirable versus undesirable behaviours. Second, respondents who might be concerned about the confidentiality of their data, might be even more likely to overreport engaging in OCBs and underreport engaging in CWBs, given that they might be afraid of potential negative repercussions at work. One way, one could verify this latter assumption is by comparing response patterns obtained in

research contexts which inherently vary in the degree of respondent anonymity such as research performed within a specific organization versus cross-organizational research performed via an online platform. For instance, if confidentiality concerns play a role, one would expect that employees participating in research within their own organizational context, would overreport OCBs and underreport CWBs when compared to employees answering the same types of questions on an online platform.

To test this assumption, I pooled data on OCBs and CWBs from various studies that I had conducted in these two types of settings: within specific organizations and in cross-organizational settings via online platforms. The group of studies described as "in organizations" consists of data obtained via surveys in various organizations, but always as part of larger research programmes that were officially approved by management. The data were collected by ensuring participants of their anonymity and confidentiality, but the surveys always included questions related to demographic variables such as gender, age, position etc. The data of the second group – "online platform" – come from a study that relied on a nationwide representative sample of Polish employees and was collected via an online platform. The respondents worked for a number of different employers, but information on the name of the employer was not collected. The data were collected by ensuring participants of their anonymity and confidentiality, and respondents provided information regarding demographic variables such as gender, age, position etc. Descriptive statistics for OCBs and CWBs in the two settings can be found in Table 2.

Table 2
Means of organizational citizenship behaviour and counterproductive work behaviour

Type of survey			OCB	CWB
In organization		Mean	4.48	1.62
		SD	0.59	0.46
		N	787	787
Online platform		Mean	4.13	1.70
		SD	0.66	0.73
		N	635	635

The pattern of results (see Table 2) suggests that, as expected, respondents are slightly more likely to report engaging in OCBs when participating in a study embedded in their own organizations than when participating in a cross-organizational online study, $t(1420) = 10.29$, $p < .001$. Similarly, they are slightly less likely to report engaging in CWBs, $t(1420) = 2.37$, $p < .05$. In sum, it appears that employees participating in research within their own organizational context, slightly overreport OCBs and underreport CWBs when compared to employees answering the same types of questions on an online platform. Yet, these differences are small and I would like to point out that these results should be interpreted with caution given the high degrees of freedom and the pooled nature of the samples. In addition, it should also be noted that the research performed in the organizational settings adhered to strict protocols to safeguard respondents' anonymity: only basic demographic data were collected, respondents filled in the surveys in their own time on paper and dropped their responses in a sealed envelope in a large box on site. Therefore, it is possible that, relatively honest answers can be expected from respondents in organizational settings, if strict protocols to safeguard their anonymity are put in place.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that safeguarding the anonymity of respondents is important for ethical reasons but also presents researchers with a methodological challenge. From an ethical perspective, care for respondents' privacy is an expression of respect for them and their personal dignity. From a methodological perspective, ensuring the confidentiality of personal data is necessary to obtain honest responses to research questions. The examples described above show that respondents' concerns about anonymity and confidential treatment of their data, might influence their response patterns to a certain extent. Importantly, trust in the researcher and the procedure are crucial for ensuring participants' sense of anonymity even when being asked to disclose some personal data.

Based on ethical principles for research (EFPA, 2005), research methodology considerations and my own experience, I would like to recommend several good practices for ensuring respondents' anonymity and confidential treatment of their data in organizational research:

- Researchers should be independent from the management of the organization (e.g., the study should be conducted by individuals independent of the organization, not by direct managers);

- Survey data should be collected anonymously (e.g., paper and pencil surveys dropped in a sealed envelope in a closed box, online surveys that do not collect IP data or e-mail addresses);

- Only demographic data necessary for hypothesis testing should be collected and care should be taken that the collected data does not allow for the identification of specific people (e.g., avoiding to simultaneously ask about the name of the team and the individual's position, as this would allow for individuals to be identified);

- Data storage should ensure respondent confidentiality, preferably outside the organization under study (e.g., in the researcher's office or on a server managed by the researcher);

- Respondents should be presented with full information on the methods employed to protect and process their data and they should have the possibility to contact the researchers to answer any questions;

- Respondents should be able to actively provide or withhold their consent for participation in the study and they should be able to withdraw their participation at any time.

To conclude, research that ensures respondent anonymity and the confidential treatment of their data, not only demonstrates respect for them and their personal dignity, but also contributes to higher quality research.

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