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Toward ethical guidelines for network research in organizations

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Abstract

All sociological/anthropological research (network or otherwise) in organizations (particularly corporations) is complicated by the need to obtain consent not only from the potential respondent but from the organization itself. Whereas in ordinary research there are essentially two parties that must come to agreement – the researcher and the respondent – in the organizational research there are three. In addition, the fact of organizational hierarchy means that the employee's participation in the research entails considerably more risk than in other situations. At the same time, social network research involves special challenges due to the lack of anonymity at the questionnaire level and the sensitivity of some of the questions. This paper seeks to lay out some of the issues and to propose a set of standard guidelines for ethical research on networks in organizations. It is hoped that developing a set of standard guidelines and forms will help Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) to allow network research. Examples of proposed forms are included as appendices.

Keywords: Social networks; Ethics; Organization; IRB

1. Introduction

When we conduct sociological or anthropological research on the population at large, we must obtain permission from our research subjects – our survey respondents – to collect

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data from them. Procedures for doing this in non-coercive ways have long been worked out through the use of informed consent forms, and adherence to these procedures is enforced by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). But the case of collecting data in organizations (particularly corporations) is somewhat different. This is because permission is also needed from the organization itself, which has an interest in preventing the distraction of its members. Typically, the price of admission involves some kind of *quid pro quo*—the researcher obtains her data, and the management of the organization receives a report tailored to their needs. In short, the researcher exchanges some data-based consulting for the right to collect data. In addition, it is quite common for academics to do paid consulting engagements from which they also obtain data for publication. This introduces dangers for the respondents because management may make job or personnel changes (e.g., firing non-central workers) based on the network analysis. In fact, in the case of a consulting engagement, this may be the explicit purpose of the research, at least from the point of view of management.

The use of network analysis to make organizational and personnel changes also introduces dangers for the academic field of social network research because knowledge of the dangers of filling out a network survey will lead organization members to resist participating, or to answer in self-serving ways. The first response makes research more difficult, and the second introduces threats to validity.

As a result, it behooves social network researchers to think carefully about ways that respondents in organizational surveys can be protected, because in doing so we preserve our own futures (Borgatti and Molina, 2003). Of course, none of these issues is entirely unique to network research. However, as we outline below, there are elements of network research design that exacerbate the problems. In addition, we believe that the newness and surprising power of network analyses cause both researchers and potential research subjects to seriously underestimate the risks of participation.

In the pages to follow, we assume (unless otherwise stated) that research in organizations involves giving data/analyses to management. Thus, our concern is with the ethical problems raised by this situation, and possible ways of dealing with these problems. Note that our concern is with protecting the individual respondents and with the long-term health of the field, and not with the organizations involved, which is a different topic.

2. Threats and counter-measures

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. In practice, however, anonymity is not guaranteed as many respondents can be uniquely identified by combinations of attributes—e.g., there is only one person in the area who is upper class, male, between the ages of 25 and 34, and of Hawaiian descent. Normally, this is not a serious problem because population sizes are large enough and because there is no way to actually match up the cases in the study with actual identities without interviewing each person in the population and classifying them by region, class, gender, age, descent and so on, which is a practical impossibility.