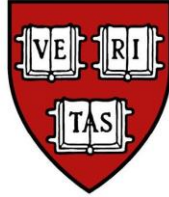


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Harvard University Area

Harvard University Area IRB Monthly Newsletter

February 2024



A belated welcome to the Spring semester! As IRB staff settle in to review the exciting work our community is proposing for 2024, we thought it may be useful to share some tips on interview and survey-based research from our experience working with you all.

Interviews and Surveys: What Does the IRB Need to Know

In short, the risks! During the design of the research and preparation of your protocol, you should identify risks that are foreseeable. In interview and survey research, these risks may be social, reputational, emotional, and confidentiality related. You should also identify whether any of the information collected, if disclosed outside of the research, could reasonably place a participant at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the participant's financial standing, employability, insurability, or reputation.

Some researchers provide the IRB with a fully realized survey, or a complete list of all questions to be used in an interview—this makes life easy for us! Other researchers do not or cannot provide such a list because of the unstructured or iterative nature of their work. That can be okay too. No matter how the information is presented, the IRB

needs to understand the level of sensitivity of the topics and questions involved. This allows us to make a determination about risk, as well as data sensitivity according to Harvard policy. In cases where you cannot provide a complete list, we ask you to provide a detailed explanation of the topics you will be discussing, highlighting areas and questions of greatest sensitivity to the participant. Samples of questions, lists of topics, and other context allow us to make our determinations. If we don't have enough information, we'll ask!

No matter how you share your interview or survey content, you should still provide a thorough explanation of your procedures in the research protocol. The clearer the description, the less chance there is that you will be asked for further clarifications. In many cases it is helpful to provide a narrative of how participants move through your study (from recruitment through debriefing or follow-up) and what procedures are used along the way.

Tips!

1. If you have surveys or interview guides, these should be uploaded in ESTR. Upload documents to the applicable section. The ESTR pages suggest documents for each section. Naming helps too—if you have more than one survey, for example, name each to correspond to how its described in your protocol.
2. The IRB has (unfortunately) had to work with researchers whose links to online surveys have been widely distributed outside the intended audience. This can result in incomplete entries and repeated entries by the same person. Please be sure to share links in ways that reach the intended audience, explain to participants how links should or should not be shared, and consider participant-specific links. If you are posting a link in an open forum, be sure to close the link when the survey is complete to avoid ongoing participation after your research is over.

Do You Speak IRB?



Expert Interviews

Sometimes researchers ask us how to approach interviews with scholars who are providing their “expert opinions,” and whether such work is subject to IRB oversight. As is so often the case with IRB review, the answers depends on the project itself and the nature of the interviews. Generally, though, there is no exception to IRB requirements for interviews with experts in a field. Such interviewees may be considered research participants if interviewed for a study where the discussion veers into collecting information about their behaviors, feelings, thoughts, experiences, or opinions (including the expert ones). The information is about them. That is, it is “about whom.”

In the context of interviews with experts, or those who may be speaking on behalf of an institution, the “about whom” part of the human subject definition sometimes requires assessment. “About whom” refers to the idea that the information collected from a person must be information about them for them to be a participant. This is a broad net cast by the federal regulations. In limited circumstances it may be possible to conduct research without human participants, even when speaking with people, if the information collected from those people is not about them. That is, they serve as a vehicle for information that anyone with the same knowledge/background would answer the same way. For example, an employee of a company stating the policies of a company, not their impression of those policies.

Unless experts are speaking for their institutions or asked to provide fact-based responses, those experts are human subjects. Interviewing experts is interviewing human subjects!

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