Researching Sensitive Topics in Marketing: The Special Case of Vulnerable Populations

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The author purposes to stimulate discussion on the unique dilemmas experienced by public policy researchers in marketing, who investigate sensitive topics with vulnerable populations. After a brief description of what constitutes sensitive research, the author discusses the impact of this sensitivity on the conduct of such investigations. He then examines how findings should be disseminated to audiences beyond the academic realm and concludes with a call for research using a critical theory perspective.

As public policy researchers in marketing begin to address sensitive topics with vulnerable populations, they will be confronted with a number of dilemmas either with which they are unfamiliar or which have acquired new meanings. Thus, my purpose here is to delineate some of these issues and, where possible, provide solutions to them. My previous research on homelessness (see Hill 1994b for a summary), juvenile delinquency (Hill 1992), bill collecting (Hill 1994a), abortion (Patterson, Hill, and Maloy 1995), and the meaning of land to Aborigines (Hill 1995), as well as some of the articles in this journal illustrate selected points. The article opens with a brief description of what constitutes sensitive research, moves to a discussion of the impact of this sensitivity on the conduct of such investigations, and then examines how findings should be disseminated. The conclusion provides a “call to arms” for policy researchers in marketing to pursue a critical theory approach.

Sensitive Topics and Vulnerable Populations

The question of what constitutes a “sensitive topic” has not been addressed by our discipline. However, other social scientists have begun a dialogue that may provide an acceptable starting point. For example, Sieber and Stanley (1988, p. 49) state that “socially sensitive research refers to studies in which there are potential social consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research.” Lee and Renzetti (1993, p. 6) concur and believe that the potential threat is greatest:

(a) where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience [see Gentry et al. 1995; Peñaloza 1995],
(b) where the study is concerned with deviance and social control [see Hirschman and McGriff 1995],
(c) where it impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or the exercise of coercion or domination, and
(d) where it deals with things sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned.

Much of my previous research treads on this ground. For example, my interactions with juvenile delinquents resulted in their telling me lengthy stories about cars that they stole, used, and sold without detection, or their drug deals that ended in profit rather than in capture by the authorities. Furthermore, my study of bill collecting revealed that collectors often bully and manipulate consumer debtors and operate within the letter rather than the intent of the law. Finally, my joint investigation of Australian Aborigines demonstrated the sacred meaning of land to them and the disruption to their lives from physical displacement from their homes by white society.

In each of these projects, information provided by informants placed them in potential jeopardy if the data were released to police officers, judges, federal agencies, or politicians. As Sieber and Stanley (1988, p. 51) note,

in conducting socially sensitive research, one of the major problems is the confidentiality of the information revealed to the re-

1 The issue of who belongs to a vulnerable population is illustrated aptly by the authors of the articles in this issue and need not be repeated here.

2 In addition to research participants and members of their communities, Sieber and Stanley (1988) also include investigators (who are visible), society at large (which may gain or lose from the application of findings), the research institution, and persons closely associated with the research participants (family, co-workers, or community members about whom private information may be revealed) as populations at risk. However, possible hazards to these groups notwithstanding, my article concentrates its attention on the former, whose individual lives may be negatively impacted by their revelations or whose reputations may be altered by the generalizations about them that ensue from the research.

3 See Costa (1994) for an excellent review of the full volume edited by Renzetti and Lee.
searcher and the privacy needs of the participants [since] socially sensitive information is the kind of research information to which law enforcement or other governmental agencies may most want access.

The possible threat posed to informants in the environments I studied was moderate, if not severe, if their identities were ever tied to the thoughts, actions, or situations they revealed.

The Conduct of Research on Sensitive Topics

The sensitivity of research topics can potentially impact each stage of an investigation, from the formulation of the problem through design, implementation, and dissemination and application of the findings (Lee and Renzetti 1993). Although the dominant paradigm in our field suggests that researchers approach such scholarship with objectivity, social scientists who study sensitive issues believe that complete value neutrality is an impossibility (Felson 1991). In fact, Becker (1967, p. 239) states "that the situation is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side we are on."

Consider the problem formulation process often undertaken at the start of a research project. Sieber and Stanley (1988) explain that posing a particular research question can have major social implications for vulnerable populations, even if the study is never performed. For instance, simply asking "Are there racial differences in intelligence?" can have a damaging impact upon some racial groups because it may be viewed as furnishing "scientific" integrity to existing prejudices.

The selection of which variables to study may also be the result of the researcher's perspective. For example, Felson (1991) finds that causal analysis could present a problem if the investigator is sympathetic toward the perceived plight of the vulnerable group. According to his position, the problem occurs when "cause" becomes synonymous with "blame," which suggests that the performance of the group is substandard because of characteristics of the group rather than the larger society. Because most researchers who study vulnerable populations wish to avoid blaming them for their situation, only causal variables external to the group are typically utilized in analyses. (See Burton, Netemeyer, and Lichtenstein 1995 for an excellent example of how to avoid such problems.)

The study of homelessness provides a good case-in-point. Much of the early research in this area suggested that homelessness was the result of "personal weaknesses," such as alcoholism and psychosis (see Hill 1994b). However, the advocacy research that was advanced in the 1980s as a result of the increased visibility of the homeless placed the blame on structural factors, such as the decrease in low-cost housing. The most recent research, in an attempt to move away from the blame mentality, combines some of both approaches when selecting which variables to investigate. This more balanced position appears to be having a much greater impact on policy makers (see Blau 1992).

Data Collection and the Role of IRBs

One area that has received considerable attention in the social sciences is the treatment of research participants during the collection of data. Renzetti and Lee (1993a, p. 101) state that "It is not unusual for the powerless or disadvantaged to treat the researcher with skepticism, fearing that cooperation will bring in its wake only further exploitation." This skepticism is particularly likely when vulnerable groups feel a need to hide their past or current behaviors, such as informants who had illegal abortions (Patterson, Hill, and Maloy 1995) or were involved in grand-theft auto (Hill 1992).

For most of this century, social scientists have conducted studies that significantly impacted research participants without interference from funding sources or their universities (see Broadhead 1984). However, ethical review is now mandated because of both the extensive use of human subjects in biomedical research and some well-publicized cases of the abuse of research participants in social science studies, such as Milgram's "Obedience to Authority" investigation (Sieber 1982a; see also Ceci, Peters, and Slotkin 1985). This concern led to the passage in 1974 of the National Research Act (Pub. Law 93-348), which created the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research.

The commission was authorized to monitor and evaluate institutional review boards (IRBs), whose creation at each institution was mandated as a condition of receiving federal agency research funds (Hessler and Galliher 1983). The commitment believed human research should be guided by the principles of beneficence, respect, and justice (Sieber 1982a). Beneficence means the avoidance of unnecessary suffering, injury, or other forms of harm and the maximization of positive outcomes for research participants. Respect means concern for the autonomy of persons and their right to control themselves, as well as concern for the information they provide to researchers. Justice means equitable distribution of social benefits and costs among all individuals involved in the investigation. I provide the impact of this new environment upon social scientists' perceptions of privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent in the subsequent section.

Privacy, Confidentiality, and Informed Consent

Although social scientists have traditionally been concerned with privacy and confidentiality, these topics take on even greater significance when research participants are asked to...
reveal intimate or incriminating information (See Burton, Netemeyer, and Lichtenstein 1995). According to Sieber (1982c, p. 145), privacy and confidentiality "are inextricably related to issues of informed consent and validity of research findings.... Privacy pertains to persons and confidentiality pertains to data." Accordingly, privacy refers to research participants’ desire to control the flow of information between themselves and investigators. Confidentiality is an extension of the concept of privacy, and refers to agreements between research participants and investigators as to who should have access to resulting information.

In the 1950s, researchers recommended concealing certain portions of collected data at the request of research participants (see Fichter and Kolb 1953). However, legal intervention, often in the form of court subpoenas, has made this protection more difficult to ensure (Lee and Renzetti 1993). The federal case involving the subpoena of Mario Brajuha’s field notes, which went to trial in 1984, provides an interesting illustration (Brajuha and Hallowell 1986). The judge’s ruling nullified the subpoena and concluded that “serious scholars are entitled to no less protection than journalists” (583 F. Supp.:993). However, the United States Court of Appeals reversed this decision. In their view, Brajuha could not claim his notes as protected in their entirety, but only those portions that involved confidentiality or privacy claims.

This ruling increases the necessity for researchers of sensitive topics with vulnerable populations to obtain voluntary informed consent prior to data collection. Sieber (1982a, p. 15) states that

- Voluntary means freely, and without threat or promise of some valuable but undue inducement for consenting. Informed means that the subject knows all that a reasonable person in that situation would want to know before giving consent.... This information should be conveyed in terms that the subject is certain to understand. Consent means explicit agreement to participate.

To meet these dictates, researchers must uncover the perceived risks and possible benefits to research participants before conducting their investigations (Sieber 1993). For example, researchers should discuss with participants the positive and negative consequences of the publication of their studies. Such activities could help informants recognize the difficulties the researcher faces and prepare them for the possible consequences of publication.

Discussing these risks must be pursued carefully. The researcher does not want to magnify such risks to the point that cooperation is unnecessarily withheld (Dingwall 1980). For example, much of my work with vulnerable populations shows that few are comfortable with a lengthy discussion of what “publication” means for an academic. Instead, using terms, such as “for use in a book on homelessness that people like myself will buy,” provided a much more tangible picture for them. Yet, researchers must refrain from promising too many benefits. Broadhead (1984, p. 118) states that “the most significant and direct reward that researchers offer subjects is to share important findings with them at a later date.” This level of expectation was certainly true of the Aboriginal informants we met in Australia. They simply asked that we understand and present their point-of-view (Hill 1995).

By Way of Summary

When researching vulnerable populations and sensitive issues, the resolution of important methodological concerns involves searching for research paradigms and procedures that yield valid results, yet, anticipate and circumvent ethical dilemmas (Sieber 1982a). Researchers might need to negotiate with many gatekeepers, including institutional review boards or human subjects review committees, funding review panels, research sponsors, governmental agencies, community leaders, and the research participants themselves (Sieber 1993). Success may depend on a continuing commitment to two principles (Somers et al. 1982): (1) Research procedures must be designed within a framework of sincere respect for the research participants’ rights to privacy and confidentiality; and (2) the study’s findings should be of interest and possible benefit to research participants, as well as, potentially, other persons with similar backgrounds.

Dissemination of Findings

The Role of the Media

Most researchers of sensitive topics with vulnerable populations hope that their findings will produce not only gains in knowledge for their fields, but also benefits for their research participants. However, social scientists rarely have a direct influence on nonacademics and must rely on the media to inform various audiences (Channels 1993). Often, public relations firms that distribute press releases containing information on newsworthy magazine and journal articles make the decisions about what is “important.” The wire services and the television and radio networks come for the press releases, selecting the ones they deem most appropriate for their audiences; they forward the items to local newspapers and broadcasters, who also act as gatekeepers, choosing a few items to be discussed in the day’s news reports.

Such dependence on the media presents difficulties for social scientists because with it comes a loss of control over which portions of their research are presented and how find-
ings are interpreted when disseminated (Channels 1993). Renzetti and Lee (1993b) found that the conflict is partially due to differences in priorities between reporters and researchers. The media places less emphasis on the technical qualities of the research and has a greater tendency to draw simple conclusions from complex results than do the researchers. Subsequently, the press often condenses an entire series of investigations into a few short sentences to "streamline" findings for readers. Thus, misinterpretations occur, which can be passed along from medium to medium (Lee and Renzetti 1993). Walum (1975, p. 29) explains how this process of dissemination occurs:

...the imaginative rendering and interpretation by a first journalist, become the facts for the second, and the basis for an editorial denouncement by the third.... As the story travels through the journalistic network it tends to grow shorter, more concise, and more easily grasped and told.... Certain aspects are sharpened and become almost frozen into each subsequent version.

Inevitably, some distortion of the researcher's primary conclusions happens, which might result in the dissemination of inaccurate information about the vulnerable population studied.

Resulting Self-Censorship

One way of regaining some control over the media environment involves some self-censorship of the investigation's results. The greater the sensitivity of the topic, the greater the likelihood that self-censorship will be perceived as providing some form of protection for vulnerable parties (Renzetti and Lee 1993b). According to Adler and Adler (1993), factors prompting self-censorship include: (1) the development of loyalties towards the setting or individuals studied;11 (2) ongoing involvement with the research site;12 (3) the goals and objectives of the institutional setting of the researchers, as well as the funding source or sponsor; and (4) personal factors, such as fear of stigma to oneself or significant others.13

Self-censorship may take many forms, but there are two primary methods: avoiding discussion of certain topics (either permanently or until research participants are no longer involved in the activities in question) or seeking publication in venues that are more obscure, such as academic journals that are infrequently cited in the popular media (Adler and Adler 1993).14 Unfortunately, this self-censorship often involves groups and topics in which "there exists a clear and urgent social interest in accurate reporting" (Renzetti and Lee 1993b, p. 230). Thus, the loss of scientific knowledge also may cause a loss to the larger society.

Some Possible Directions for Researchers

As studies of sensitive topics with vulnerable populations increase in number and visibility within the marketing discipline, issues of media exposure and self-censorship are likely to also arise. There are three major directions that researchers can take to cope with these issues. First, scholars must avoid asserting that knowledge is ethically "neutral," because few outside of the academic domain share this view, and they may interpret the results to further their own causes (see Sieber and Stanley 1988). Second, working within the boundaries of well-established research paradigms, scholars must select procedures that provide them with the means to respond to criticisms and protect findings from attack (Channels 1993). Currently, most researchers only consider the scholarly community as relevant, but increasing the exposure of their work to the public at large may make salient a different set of concerns. Third, researchers must proactively respond to this new environment to ensure that accurate information is disseminated.15 The use of press releases that are free of confusing academic jargon could help avoid problems of misinterpretation (Sieber 1993). Finally, scholars should also both insist on face-to-face interviews with reporters and check all citations for accuracy before publication.

Critical Theory: A New Perspective for Public Policy Researchers in Marketing

The values expressed in the preceding discussion are epitomized by the work of Ozanne and colleagues on critical theory (Murray and Ozanne 1991; Murray, Ozanne, and Shapiro 1994; Ozanne and Murray 1995). According to her research, critical theory is founded on conflict orientation, which suggests that various social actors within a research environment have opposing needs, desires, and goals. Thus, scientific knowledge is inescapably political, with different parties seeking dissimilar benefits from and uses for research results. Critical theorists concentrate their attention on subordinated groups within a society by examining the social forces that constrain them, attempting to establish a dialogue that exposes this subordination to them, and searching for ways to free them from the forces that restrict their lives.

Critical Ethnography

One important methodological example of critical theory, which is appropriate for marketing researchers who examine sensitive issues with vulnerable populations, is critical ethnography (see Hill 1993 for a more complete discussion of ethnographic methods). Critical ethnography is a reflective process that selects among theoretical alternatives and makes value-laden judgments to challenge and modify existing research, public policies, and negative stereotypes or prejudices (Thomas and O'Maolchatha 1989). The primary goal of critical ethnography is emancipation from repressive ways of thinking and acting, thus, thwarting social domination that constrains groups within a society.

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11Snow (1980) found that the more intense the researcher's identification with the population under investigation, the greater the sense of commitment to them. See Pedalozza (1995) for an example.
12Gatekeepers within the research site may attempt to influence the problem area studied, limit access to data and respondents, and retain prerogatives with respect to publication (see Broadhead and Rist 1976).
13This problem is most likely to arise when the investigation involves "deviant" behaviors such as drug abuse, prostitution, and homosexuality.
14However, as Russ Lacznik found with his investigation of children and 900-number advertising (Lacznik, Muehling, and Carlson 1995), such issue-oriented investigations can be acquired by the media, though they were originally intended only for academic sources.
15Such an approach seems consistent with the recent desire by most universities for an increase in relevance and exposure of the faculty's research.
Critical ethnography "begins from the premise that the structure and content of culture make life unnecessarily more nasty, brutish, and short for some people" (Thomas 1993, p. 33), and that these forces shape the thinking and behaviors of dominant, as well as subordinate, groups. Critical ethnographers believe repression is pervasive in society, and they identify, illustrate, and provide alternatives to the processes within a culture that produces repression. Furthermore, whereas traditional researchers speak for their subjects to primarily academic audiences, critical ethnographers assume the added research task of empowering their informants by attempting to change perceptions and policies developed by members of the dominant culture. Critical ethnographers tend to focus their data collection efforts early in the research process, but continue to seek and include additional sources of information that could reveal further forms of cultural repression. Not all data or informants are considered equal because many present the "party line" rather than their actual beliefs and behaviors. Thus, critical ethnographers pay particular attention to the differences between rhetoric and action as a way of understanding informants' coping patterns in their subordinated status. The researcher's job, according to Thomas (1993, p. 43):

...resembles literary criticism in that we look for the nonliteral meanings of our data texts. The researcher decodes the ways that the symbols of culture create asymmetrical power relations, constraining ideology, beliefs, norms, and other forces that unequally distribute social rewards, keep people disadvantaged to the advantage of others, and block fuller participation in or understanding of our social environs.

Critical ethnographers recognize that how they "hear" informants speak to them and how they translate what they have heard into written reports, provide the researcher with the power to interpret and convey "reality" (Thomas 1993). This reality should present the cultural forms of exclusion and repression, as well as their implications for informants within the context of their current and future lives. In the end, critical ethnographers challenge these injustices and provide possible solutions to both subordinate and dominant groups.

Concluding Comments

Readers will recognize that one important premise of my article is that researchers are never objective and that knowledge is never neutral. Thus, consistent with the critical ethnographer's role, public policy scholars should "celebrate their normative and political position as a means of invoking social consciousness and societal change" (Thomas 1993, p. 4). Research participants should be freed from the "shackles" previously associated with the role of the "subject," and should be recast as willing partners and equals in a collective enterprise of knowledge production. Furthermore, public policy researchers in marketing should take active roles within their study environments, explicitly confronting the problems that impact the lives of those who are subordinated.

This type of advocacy has no tradition within the public policy and marketing scholarly community due, in part, to the positivist illusion held by many, that research is value-free and represents an objective reality. My article challenges this perspective and opens the debate on the merits of an advocacy position. What better way to meet our professional and personal goals of advancing humankind than to understand, inform, and lobby for those in our society who are most vulnerable?

References


