Social Science Data Reuse 
and Institutional Review Boards: 
A Pilot Study of Stakeholders’ Opinions

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Background

• This study, conducted at a large research university, assessed the opinions of IRB members and social science researchers about data sharing and archiving.

• It particularly focuses on possible ethical issues or other real or perceived barriers to full utilization of digital data repositories by examining potential users’ attitudes towards digital repositories.

• It should be considered a pilot study due to the small samples and exploratory methods.

Methods

A Survey of social/behavioral science researchers across the university, including doctoral students and faculty, included multiple choice and free response sections. 74 surveys completed (700 emails sent out).

B Interviews of 5 members of a social/behavioral IRB interviewed

C Content analysis of previously approved IRB applications, coded according to their language about future plans for data. 93 blank informed consent documents from 2008 “approved” IRB applications examined.

Key Findings

Of researchers…

• 84.9% had never archived data; 77.8% said they would consider doing so

• 61.6% thought the IRB would approve a study that included a plan to archive de-identified data for future use; 31.5% didn’t know

• Most weren’t comfortable archiving data based on what they said in their last IRB application

Of IRB members...

• Most were generally supportive of data archiving

• 4 of 5 preferred to see data archiving plans explicitly indicated on IRB applications

• All mentioned “anonymity,” “confidentiality,” “de-identification,” and “informed consent”

Coded blank informed consent forms (n=93)

Limitations

• Study was conducted at a single university

• Small sample size for interviews

• Very low survey response (possibly explained by those not requiring IRB approval)

• Possible over-representation of Information & Library Science researchers who might be more aware of or supportive of data repositories

Recommendations

• Early intervention by repositories

• Discussion within IRBs on how data archiving in social/behavioral science should be handled

• Guidance provided by IRBs and repositories

• Continued education and research

Cited

See also: Davis & Connolly (2007), Foster & Gibbons (2005), Green & Gutmann (2007), Markey, et al. (2007), and Witkowski & Alter (2009)

Full report is available at http://sils.unc.edu/itrc/mpi/