

Title: Protecting Confidentiality When Conducting an Internet Survey

Author: Celia B. Fisher, *Decoding the Ethics Code: A Practical Guide for Psychologists*, Sage Publications, 2003

Description: In conducting a survey on marital conflict over the Internet, a research psychologist fails to protect the confidentiality of respondents' data. Fisher presents this as an example of poor research practices.

Headings: Privacy and Confidentiality; Anonymous/de-identified data; Privacy in data collection; Storage of data

Case Type: Illustrative

Protecting Confidentiality When Conducting an Internet Survey

A psychologist decided to conduct a survey study on marital conflict over the Internet. She posted an explanation of the study on a university Web site. Those who wished to participate were asked to download the questionnaire into their personal computers and to e-mail their responses back to the psychologist. The explanation on the Web site claimed that participant responses were anonymous and thus there were no risks to confidentiality. However, the psychologist's university did not have the technology necessary to de-identify respondent e-mail addresses, so in fact there was a chance that an e-mail address might be recognized by the psychologist, a research assistant, or others. In addition, the Web site explanation did not warn participants to password protect the completed file saved on their personal computer.