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Editorial

Stop agonising over informed consent when researchers use crowdsourcing platforms to conduct survey research

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Jonathan Lewis[1], Vilius Dranseika[2] and Søren Holm[1,3]

Introduction

Crowdsourcing and online research platforms for surveys and some kinds of behavioural research have become accepted in many disciplines, generally providing efficient, cost-effective and population-capturing alternatives to more traditional institution-based participant pools.[1,2] Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) was the first crowdsourcing website to be widely exploited by scholars for the purposes of recruiting human participants for research-specific *Human Intelligence Tasks* (i.e. surveys and behavioural studies). However, it was not explicitly designed for the research community and has, as a result, presented some problems – not least, slowing rates of population replenishment and increasing levels of non-naivety within its crowdworker pool.[1,2] These issues have, to a certain extent, been addressed by the development of recruitment platforms catering to the needs of researchers and participants, most notably, Prolific, which, as of October 2023, houses some 130,000 active participants with c.87,000 of those having taken part in at least 100 studies each.

A cursory web search reveals that many research institutions in English-speaking countries have developed research ethics materials intended for studies conducted on MTurk, Prolific, and other online recruitment platforms. Moreover, at least where informed consent is concerned, we are aware that research ethics committees (RECs) and institutional review boards (IRBs) spend considerable time scrutinising consent processes and materials for these studies.

In this editorial, we question whether RECs and IRBs should, in general, agonise over the details of the consent processes in survey-based studies that are carried out on online recruitment platforms. Before we begin, a small clarification is in order to avoid misunderstanding. We argue neither for conducting research without participant consent nor for research without ethical oversight. What we argue is that, in many survey-based studies, the procedures for obtaining informed consent should be much simpler than is currently often the case.

Undermining consent: Routinisation and the 'no read' problem in theory and practice

The requirement for informed consent in research contexts is often justified by the principle of respect for autonomous decision-making.[3–5] Although the conditions for informed consent should not be conflated with the conditions for the exercise of autonomy,[6,7] informed consent can be said to *facilitate* autonomy to the extent that it grants a research participant their liberty (at law) to voluntarily permit or refuse their participation and the specific interventions in their life arising from the study by reflecting on, rationally identifying with, or responding soundly to their own motivating attitudes.[7–10,a]

The validity of consent generally turns on the satisfaction of three conditions:

1. That the participant receives and understands adequate information about the study;
2. That the participant is competent to decide whether or not to participate;
3. That the participant's consent is voluntary.[8]

Previous studies have indicated that there is a 'no read problem' in the use of ICT services and that consent becomes routinised when users of ICT services and online healthcare systems are repeatedly asked to give similar consent.[8–10] On the one hand, the 'no read

[1]Centre for Social Ethics and Policy, Department of Law, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK
[2]Interdisciplinary Centre for Ethics, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland
[3]Centre for Medical Ethics, Faculty of Medicine, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

Corresponding author:
Jonathan Lewis, Centre for Social Ethics and Policy, Department of Law, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK.
Email: jonathan.lewis-2@manchester.ac.uk

problem' arises when users of certain online systems or platforms do not read some or all of the information provided by researchers before consenting to a specific study. On the other hand, the provision or refusal of consent is considered to be routinised if, and only if, it is a habitual act involving a 'suspension of reflection'.[8–10] The 'no read problem' and routinisation of consent are related.[b] If a research participant habitually gives consent to specific studies without having read some or all of the information provided by researchers in the consent materials, then it implies, *ceteris paribus*, the routinisation of her consent.[10] Furthermore, in relation to both issues, the participant cannot reasonably be perceived to have adequately reflected on that information. Consequently, if the suspension of reflection entails, at least in principle, a lack of understanding of the relevant information, then the 'no read problem' and the routinisation of consent, both separately and when taken together, undermine the validity of consent to the extent that the participant is unable to fulfil one of its most commonly assumed conditions. Thus, there may be scope to argue that routinisation undermines the voluntariness of the consent process.

Could there be a lack of reflective engagement with the information presented by researchers as part of the consent process on online recruitment platforms? If so, what are the implications for the validity of any consent given?

Let us look at some examples of how long study participants spend on consent forms. In a study conducted on Prolific by one of our colleagues ($N = 751$; consent form 266 words in length), the mean time spent on the form was 38s (median = 19s). This equates to 420 words per minute (wpm) average reading speed (840wpm median). In a different study ($N = 821$), with a much longer consent form (1024 words), mean time was 26s (median = 13s), resulting in 2381 words per minute average reading speed (4626wpm median). These are conservative estimates because the time spent on the forms included additional actions, including indicating one's consent. In addition, there's evidence to suggest that some participants perform other unrelated tasks while attending to surveys on online recruitment platforms.[11,12]

How does this relate to what is known about reading speed, comprehension, and recall?[c]

A recent meta-analysis of the reading speed of English non-fiction gives an average silent reading rate of 238wpm for native adult readers (median = 235wpm).[13] For silent reading of English non-fiction, most adults fall in the range of 175–300wpm.[13] If we assume that participants demonstrate 'understanding' of a text by recalling information, then evidence suggests that 100wpm is optimal for reading to recall.[13]

Thus we can see that the 420wpm and 2381wpm average reading speeds for these particular consent forms are considerably above the average reading speed (238wpm), the upper limit reading speed for most adults (300wpm), and the average reading speed for recall (100wpm). This indicates that the participants have read the information provided very quickly and might indicate that there are parts of the information that have not been read at all.

Is this a serious problem?

Is it a serious problem for survey research conducted on online recruitment platforms if participants do not read and reflect on the consent materials to a degree such that we can be reasonably certain that they have understood this information? We believe that it isn't and will argue that they are, nevertheless, sufficiently informed to give valid consent.

First, a high proportion of members of these platforms are seasoned participants; most members spend several hours per week on these platforms and evidence suggests that most studies tend to be completed by a relatively small number of highly active participants.[1,2,15–17] This implies that most participants will have already engaged with these kinds of survey studies and be relatively well acquainted with the consequences, burdens, and risks associated with their participation.

Second, the literature suggests that one of the functions of informed consent is to manage participant risk.[18] Not only are the risks associated with survey studies on online recruitment platforms, particularly in terms of sensitive disclosure and distress, oftentimes small, but also there are, as we detail below, ways to manage these risks if necessary.

Third, the validity of consent can be undermined if the rewards for participation are sufficient to motivate a participant to consent to a study when they otherwise would have principled objections. In terms of online recruitment platforms, there is little risk of undue inducement. The payment that participants receive for undertaking a study on MTurk, Prolific, and other mainstream platforms is relatively low, and although there are problems with the remuneration policy on MTurk,[1] payment levels on Prolific are not sufficient to constitute undue inducement for the current user base, which originates exclusively from OECD countries (with the exception of South Africa). Furthermore, even if there was the potential for undue inducement, it cannot be prevented or mitigated simply by providing more or less information as part of the consent process.

To put it differently, the amount of information that the typical member of a recruitment platform needs to be able to give informed consent to participation is fairly minimal. What is the study about? What is the nature of the tasks involved? How long does it take? How much will I be paid? Who is conducting the study? Answers to this set of questions give the potential participant the necessary information to decide whether they have any objections to the research question or the researcher and whether the time/remuneration ratio is acceptable. Indeed,

prospective participants already see this information on Prolific when scrolling through lists of available studies. Furthermore, they can always contact the researcher through the internal messaging system.

Currently, however, many RECs and IRBs also require a participant to complete a separate consent form. Our argument indicates that this requirement is ethically unnecessary and may also be almost completely pointless if participants do not read or reflect on the information before proceeding with the survey.

Conclusion

In general, the lack of adequate participant reflection on consent materials that accompany the sorts of surveys and behavioural studies conducted on crowdsourcing and online research platforms is not a serious problem. At least, it is not a problem worthy of in-depth REC or IRB scrutiny. As long as the study title is reasonably informative and accurate, RECs and IRBs should not insist on separate consent forms and should definitely not waste their time on developing or revising such forms if they continue to insist on them.

Of course, in those rare cases where there is the potential for studies to generate appreciable participant risks (e.g. that focus on particularly sensitive or distressing topics) or that rely on the employment of deceptive or incomplete disclosure practices (for methodological and/or epistemic purposes), then not only will RECs and IRBs be more justified in scrutinising the details of the informed consent process, but also researchers may have to find ways of dealing with the 'no read problem' and routinisation. For instance, in cases that involve particularly sensitive topics, deception, or incomplete disclosure, debriefing sessions for all participants, regardless of whether they complete the survey or not, and *post hoc* consent to the use of results are two common ways of facilitating the ethical treatment of research participants.[19,d]

Contributors

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Patient consent for publication

Not applicable.

Notes

a. Of course, informed consent can perform several other functions depending on the context.
b. See Ploug and Holm[10] for additional factors indicative of routinisation. The reasons why users do not adequately reflect on consent-relevant information lie beyond the scope of this article, but some of these have been identified in the literature.[8–10]
c. We recognise that it is problematic to draw reliable predictions regarding text understanding on the basis of reading speed alone (i.e. without consideration of other factors – e.g. difficulty and the length of text, type of comprehension test, reading context, range of readers sampled, stability of the reading process, and so on).[13,14] Furthermore, we are aware there is little evidence that individual differences in reading rate lead to better or worse comprehension.
d. We are immensely grateful to Piotr Bystranowski (Interdisciplinary Centre for Ethics, Jagiellonian University) and Joanna Demaree-Cotton (Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, University of Oxford) for providing us with the reading speed data for their respective studies conducted on Prolific.

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