

Publication

First do no harm: An exploration of researchers' ethics of conduct in Big Data behavioral studies

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Research ethics has traditionally been guided by well-established documents such as the Belmont Report and the Declaration of Helsinki. At the same time, the introduction of Big Data methods, that is having a great impact in behavioral research, is raising complex ethical issues that make protection of research participants an increasingly difficult challenge. By conducting 39 semi-structured interviews with academic scholars in both Switzerland and United States, our research aims at exploring the code of ethics and research practices of academic scholars involved in Big Data studies in the fields of psychology and sociology to understand if the principles set by the Belmont Report are still considered relevant in Big Data research. Our study shows how scholars generally find traditional principles to be a suitable guide to perform ethical data research but, at the same time, they recognized and elaborated on the challenges embedded in their practical application. In addition, due to the growing introduction of new actors in scholarly research, such as data holders and owners, it was also questioned whether responsibility to protect research participants should fall solely on investigators. In order to appropriately address ethics issues in Big Data research projects, education in ethics, exchange and dialogue between research teams and scholars from different disciplines should be enhanced. In addition, models of consultancy and shared responsibility between investigators, data owners and review boards should be implemented in order to ensure better protection of research participants.

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