



Ethical Issues with Contingent Valuation Surveys in Developing Countries: A Note on Informed Consent and Other Concerns

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Abstract. This article calls attention to some of the problems involved in the ethical review and oversight of contingent valuation research in developing countries, including the question of what informed consent means in a cross-cultural context. A central area of concern is that contingent valuation (CV) surveys have the potential to confuse or mislead respondents. This can cause an individual respondent who is confused or misled to take actions that could harm himself or members of his household. The spread of misinformation and confusion among the study population could also influence the policy process itself in unintended and unfortunate ways, perhaps harming the respondent or others. There are three main ways in which CV surveys can mislead or confuse an individual respondent and spread confusion in the study population: (1) inaccurate provision of background information in the CV scenario, (2) the description of the hypothetical market, and (3) the use of the referendum elicitation procedure and other split-sample experiments commonly used by CV researchers. The difficulties of cross-cultural communication and cooperation add to the ethical complexity of conducting CV surveys in developing countries. Three cross-cultural problems deserve special attention by both institutional review boards and contingent valuation researchers: (i) promises of anonymity and the right of respondents not to participate, (ii) power asymmetries between international and local members of the contingent valuation research team, and (iii) compensation of respondents.

Key words: contingent valuation method, ethical review, informed consent, institutional review boards

JEL classifications: C80, Q51, O13, O20, N50

1. Introduction

Over the last 40 years, an increasingly elaborate regulatory structure has evolved in both the United States and Europe to protect human subjects who participate in research projects. The principal goals of these oversight efforts are to ensure that human subjects are not harmed by the research and that they can choose whether or not to participate. The frontline activities of this regulatory structure are carried out by “Institutional Review Boards” (IRBs) that have been created by

research institutions such as universities to oversee the activities of their individual researchers.

Most contingent valuation (CV) surveys conducted in developing countries receive little of the ethical scrutiny that is now commonly given to social science surveys in the United States and Europe by these IRBs. In developing countries there is a patchwork of customs and practices covering the ethical review of social science and policy research activities, but there is little serious oversight of the activities of CV researchers. In fact, some major donors do not even require IRB approval of the CV surveys they commission. This note lists some of the ethical concerns that CV surveys raise and discusses the added complexity of conducting an IRB review of cross-cultural CV research protocols. In this essay my objective is to call attention to some of the problems involved in the ethical review and oversight of CV research in developing countries, including the question of what *informed consent* means in a cross-cultural context.

2. Background: The Regulatory Environment

In the United States the initial impetus for the creation of IRBs came in the 1960s from the U.S. Government, which was concerned with serious ethical mistakes that had occurred with the use of human subjects in biomedical experiments, most famously the Tuskegee experiments (Jones 1981). The U.S. Government required that research organizations oversee activities funded with government monies to ensure that human subjects were not coerced or unknowingly put at risk of harm by the treatment interventions that were being tested in a particular experimental design. Universities accepted these regulations in large part to ensure continued access to government research funding. International organizations that typically rely on their own resources for funding research activities, such as the World Bank, were under less pressure to create such a regulatory structure, and in fact they have often not done so.

The IRBs initially dealt largely with the review of biomedical or clinical research proposals that were funded by the U.S. Government. Early on, however, it was recognized that social science research had the potential to harm human subjects, and the U.S. Government required that the IRBs of research organizations seeking federal funding review these proposals as well (Beauchamp et al. 1982; Oakes 2002). Other funding agencies (e.g., private foundations) soon asked universities to use the IRB regulatory structure in place to review proposals submitted to them as well. Universities and research institutes also took it upon themselves to review the research of faculty and students involving human subjects irrespective of the requirements of the funding agencies – and even if the research was not funded at all (Begley 2002). This was in large part due to increased awareness of the ethical risks involved in human subjects research in the social sciences and a concern that proper oversight procedures be in place, as well as a legitimate fear of legal liability if a formal review was not done and problems arose (AAUP 2001).

Social scientists new to the IRB review process often wonder what such ethical concerns have to do with them at all: how could their research possibly harm anyone? There are four main ways that social science research protocols, including CV interviews with willing respondents (in both industrialized and developing countries), could harm human subjects. First, the questions asked in the interview could confuse, worry, or mislead respondents and cause them to act in ways that are not in their best interest. For example, the information presented in the CV scenario could lead a respondent to believe that the hypothetical good or service described was *really* going to be provided to them. Second, the information that the respondent provides to the researcher in the interview could be inadvertently or intentionally released to the public, and come back to harm the respondent in terms of his reputation or economic livelihood. For example, if the respondent provided confidential information on his sexual practices or health status, if this information became widely known in the community, it could result in the loss of employment or social ostracism.

Third, respondents could unknowingly provide information that would lead to the design of policy alternatives or the selection of projects that would harm them. Fourth, participation in the research could involve the loss of time and/or resources that would result in harm to the respondent. Even if a respondent willingly agrees to participate in a study, subsequent activities of enumerators and the research team could differ from what the respondent was initially promised, thus imposing unanticipated costs on the respondent.

In order to protect respondents from harm, the existing regulatory structure, based on IRB review, provides four main types of safeguards. First, respondents should be entitled to choose whether to participate in the research endeavor, based upon their own reasoned assessment of the risks and benefits to them. They should be provided clear, objective information about the research project on which to make this assessment. They then give their *informed consent* that they have considered the risks and benefits, and have decided to participate.

Second, respondents have the right to an independent assessment by an impartial body of the risks and benefits of the research. The key point here is that human “subjects” are entitled to have this balancing of risks and benefits done by *someone other than the researcher*. Third, the process for selecting respondents for the study should be equitable and just. Fourth, researchers must be certified before they can carry out their projects in an ethical manner, i.e., they must pass a test to ensure that they fully appreciate the ethical issues involved in research with human subjects.

IRBs are charged with ensuring that these safeguards are in place and implemented effectively. The IRB will typically just check to see that (a) informed consent is obtained from the respondent, and (b) the researcher has received his certification. Because social science research protocols often use some kind of random sampling procedure, the equitable selection of respondents, is only rarely an important concern of the IRB. Most of the actual work of the IRB focuses on the second safeguard above.

3. Special Ethical Concerns Raised by Contingent Valuation Surveys

Some types of ethnographic research and attitudinal and psychological surveys surely pose even greater potential problems than most CV surveys in terms of their ability to cause harm to respondents. There is, however, one aspect of CV research that is different from many other social science research protocols, and makes their review by IRBs particularly difficult. The central area of concern is that CV surveys have the potential to confuse or mislead respondents. This can cause two types of problems. First, an individual respondent who is confused or misled may take actions that could harm himself or members of his household. Second, the spread of misinformation and confusion among the study population could influence the policy process itself in unintended and unfortunate ways, perhaps harming the respondent or others. There are three main ways in which CV surveys can mislead or confuse an individual respondent and spread confusion in the study population: (a) provision of background information in the CV scenario, (b) the description of the hypothetical market, and (c) the use of the referendum elicitation procedure and other split-sample experiments commonly used by CV researchers.

3.1. PROVISION OF BACKGROUND INFORMATION IN CONTINGENT VALUATION SCENARIOS

The CV scenario typically presents a good deal of information to respondents, often including pictures and figures. Most social science research protocols are simply focused on data gathering, not conveying technical information about a hypothetical program or policy. As an example of how the provision of such information could harm respondents, consider a CV survey on the demand for a hypothetical vaccine to prevent HIV/AIDS. Suppose the CV scenario presents information about the current prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the city in which the respondent lives. If the prevalence rate presented to the respondent is wrong, and less than the actual figure, the respondent might be more likely to discontinue avertive behaviors currently undertaken, and thus unwisely increase her risk of contracting the virus. IRBs would rightly have an interest in making sure that this kind of mistake did not happen.

3.2. DESCRIPTION OF THE HYPOTHETICAL MARKET OR CHOICE PROBLEM

In a CV survey the respondent may be asked to consider a hypothetical, counterfactual situation and then queried as to what he would do in such a situation (i.e., whether he would purchase the good or service offered, or vote for the program, at a specified price or monthly fee). There are many ways that respondents can be confused by such questions, but probably the most likely is that they imagine that the situation is not in fact hypothetical. This could happen due to translation problems or the inability of the local language to convey the meaning of the conditional subjunctive. Or more subtly, the respondent may wonder why he is being

asked about something that does not exist, and conclude that in fact it must exist (or people would not be asking him about it).

3.3. USE OF SPLIT-SAMPLE EXPERIMENTAL DESIGNS, INCLUDING THE REFERENDUM ELICITATION PROCEDURE

Most high-quality CV surveys use split-sample techniques as part of the elicitation procedure or the CV scenario itself. The objectives of these experimental designs are to both estimate respondents' willingness to pay and test the reliability and consistency of respondents' answers. This means that different respondents in a CV survey will receive different sets of information to consider. If respondents speak with each other about their interviews, they may become confused as to why they were told something different than others in the community (Whittington 1998, 2002).

Members of IRBs from both the biomedical and social sciences may be puzzled by the CV researcher's reasons for asking respondents hypothetical questions about the good or service (or program) that is the focus of the study, or by the rationale for experimental designs in which different scenarios and prices are offered to different subsamples of the study population. Why not simply ask respondents what you "really want to know"? i.e., why not just tell them the "actual" situation? The simple answer is that economists want to know the demand curve, not just a point on the demand curve. Also, the policy or project itself may not yet exist; such information on the potential benefits of the project or program is needed for the policy design process. But even economists may have difficulty understanding the purpose of hypothetical question in a CV survey or the use of split-sample experiments, and may propose a revision of the CV question that asks a much simpler, more "straightforward" question, in effect ruining the research design (see Merrett 2002).

4. Added Dilemmas of Conducting Contingent Valuation Surveys in a Cross-Cultural Context

The difficulties of cross-cultural communication and cooperation add to the ethical complexity of conducting CV surveys in developing countries. There are three cross-cultural problems that deserve special attention by both IRBs and CV researchers.

4.1. INFORMED CONSENT: PROMISES OF ANONYMITY AND THE RIGHT NOT TO PARTICIPATE

The first involves the matter of informed consent, the anonymity of the respondent, and the respondent's right not to participate. Officials in many undemocratic governments in developing countries may be puzzled or bemused by the notion

that individuals have a right for the information provided in the interview not to be linked back to them. Likewise, respondents may find it totally implausible that the information they provide in an interview will be kept confidential from government authorities, which are in fact supporting the study (as the respondents have rightly been informed in the consent form!). Indeed, respondents may well feel the enumerator is disingenuous or naïve by promising them anonymity, thus launching the interview on a poor footing. Promises of anonymity are particularly suspect in CV surveys because the research is typically done at the bequest of government or a donor, and this authority obviously wants the information that specific, identifiable respondents provide. This is one of the reasons why CV researchers are often tempted not to reveal the full involvement of the government or donor in the funding of the study.

There is an ethical tradeoff that has received little attention in the literature on survey research in developing countries between the promise of anonymity and the ability to implement rigorous random sampling procedures (and thus select respondents equitably). Countries with the best sampling frames are generally the least democratic. Communist states in particular often have amazingly accurate computerized databases on all households, and it is relatively easy to carry out excellent random sampling procedures if one has access to such databases. Moreover, it is not simply the existence of the sampling frame that enables the researcher to interview a well-chosen random sample of respondents; it is the ability of the government to quickly and efficiently locate each household.

Obtaining meaningful informed consent is not simply a problem because of the issue of anonymity. A respondent may feel that she cannot refuse to be interviewed, despite what the consent form says. Problems with promises of anonymity and the respondent's inability to refuse to participate both combine to make the process of obtaining meaningful informed consent in developing countries in a CV survey particularly difficult. In my experience, many respondents in developing countries either read the consent form with indifference (assuming they can read), or sign without reading it at all. Enumerators themselves are often embarrassed by having to read promises of anonymity, and, without rigorous training, will usually either skip the informed consent part of an interview, or simply present it to the respondent to sign without explaining it.

4.2. POWER ASYMMETRIES BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL MEMBERS OF THE CONTINGENT VALUATION RESEARCH TEAM

When teams of researchers from both industrialized and developing countries cooperate to carry out a CV survey, the international professionals may or may not bring with them the accoutrements of the formal IRB process, e.g., informed consent forms with promises of anonymity and the right to refuse to participate. If they do, this can serve as one of many signals of who is really in charge of the survey design and field procedures. The money to pay for most CV surveys

in developing countries comes from abroad, and it is unusual for the international members of the research team not to have disproportionate power over how the research funds are spent and the research conducted.

The requirements of overseas IRBs and the structures of research funding contribute to a research environment in which it is easy for local research collaborators to feel that their academic freedom is being violated. International consultants conducting CV research need to be sensitive to any concerns that their local collaborators may have about the external IRB review process. In practice this will often mean not insisting on the rigid application of IRB requirements.

The imposition of the IRB review process on the international members of the research team, but not the local members, may actually influence the way the collaboration is structured. The IRB review process offers international members of the CV research team an appealing escape hatch, i.e., a means of avoiding full IRB scrutiny. If (1) the local researchers are (or appear to be) in charge of all study design and data collection activities, and (2) the international members of the team are only responsible for providing training and technical assistance to the local team on such matters as study design (and perhaps providing “help” analyzing and interpreting the data), then their home IRB may conclude that the activities of the international team are subject to minimal or expedited IRB review.

4.3. COMPENSATING RESPONDENTS

In a cross-cultural context, paying respondents to compensate them for the possible inconvenience of being interviewed raises a potentially troubling ethical issue. IRBs typically require that any compensation paid to respondents must be commensurate with the time or services provided. Compensation cannot be so high as to in effect coerce an individual into participating in the research. To economists this notion of a coercive payment may seem misguided because in fact the individual is still free to refuse, but the general consensus among biomedical researchers and most social scientists is that it is unethical to pay a respondent so much that she feels that she has little choice but to participate.

If this notion of financial coercion is accepted, then CV researchers working in developing countries must determine what compensation is fair for the time spent in an interview. The compensation paid must be neither too low nor too high, but “just right”. For an average household, this may not too difficult to determine. If compensation is to be paid, it can be based on the minimum wage or the wages of an unskilled worker. However, for the truly destitute in many developing countries, almost any payment could be perceived as coercive, and thus deemed unethical.

5. Conclusions

It is beyond the scope of this short essay to prioritize these ethical concerns listed above, or to offer guidelines for researchers for dealing with these problems. An

examination of alternative ethical frameworks for addressing the issues raised is needed, and should be the focus of further study and research. However, I will offer a few concluding remarks that CV researchers working in developing countries may find helpful in reflecting on these ethical issues.

In my opinion IRBs in the United States and Europe have a relatively limited role to play in improving the ethical review of CV and other social science research activities in developing countries. The members of IRBs are simply too far removed from the local political and cultural realities of research to provide effective protection of human subjects in developing countries, and should seek the guidance from an outside CV professional before passing quick judgment on a CV researcher's proposed protocols.

IRBs based in industrialized countries do, however, have three important roles to play. First, they can support and advise researchers in their institutions about the ethical dilemmas and problems involved in cross-cultural social science research, including CV surveys. Second, IRBs in industrialized countries should focus their attention on the most egregious potential mistakes in social science research. These include the possibility of international researchers themselves releasing confidential information that could harm respondents in developing countries and any practices of researchers that could involve coercion of respondents to participate. From my perspective, formulistic attempts to impose western concepts of informed consent on other cultures should be avoided.

Third, IRBs in industrialized countries could ensure that CV researchers communicate their findings to the community where the research was conducted. Communities should not be left in the dark about the researcher's findings. Respondents are entitled to know what the researchers say they learned from the interviews, in part because respondents may feel that their opinions or preferences have not been characterized fairly or accurately.

The primary responsibility for the ethical review of social science research activities in developing countries must lie, however, with IRBs or similar oversight institutions in the countries themselves. Donors and IRBs in industrialized countries can help create such institutions and foster their development. For their part, CV researchers need to acknowledge that there are some problematic ethical aspects of the research they do, and that IRBs have a legitimate interest in reviewing their protocols. A basic requirement is that individuals are entitled to an independent review of the risks and benefits of the research; this means that the judgment does not rest with the CV researcher herself. Finally, international donors such as the World Bank need to join the global research community and acknowledge that even the research activities of their staff and consultants should be subject to systematic ethical review if human subjects are involved.

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