

Article: Sensitive Topics: Issues and Strategies

As researchers, we are often asked to explore sensitive topics with respondents. This necessitates a combination of skills and strategies to ensure client objectives are met while fully respecting the respondents' vulnerabilities.

In this article, we will define what makes a topic sensitive, the researcher's required skill set, the logistics required, the research methodology parameters, the importance of the debriefing phase and some reporting considerations.

Defining a Sensitive Topic

Topics tend to be sensitive depending on the context, the cultural norms and the values to be explored. For example, the context contributes to the sensitivity when dealing with subjects that are private, stressful and/or sacred: such as sexuality, death, and activities related to religious beliefs - to mention a few. Exploring cultural norms may address feelings of stigma or fear such as illegal behaviour of teenage respondents. **Overall, any topic which is likely to elicit an emotional response is considered sensitive.**

Researcher's Skill Set

The greatest challenge for researchers exploring potentially emotional topics with respondents is to balance sensitivity to the respondents' feelings and our own emotional response while keeping an objective eye to the research objectives at hand.

An open, friendly and non-judgmental, supportive and genuine disposition is a must. Being attentive to distress cues expressed verbally and physically through body language will communicate that we are accepting of the respondents' emotions in the hopes of helping them feel safe to encourage continuing disclosure of thoughts and feelings. Mirroring techniques are especially important to create the sense of collaboration and complicity. Being fully prepared on the sensitive topic through secondary research such as blogs, related websites, advocacy groups

definitely helps the moderators anticipate the emotional charge of the topics to be discussed and demystifies the topics before the fieldwork.

Research Methodologies

Given the wide range of methodologies currently available, sensitive issues can be addressed to maximize the respondents' comfort level in sharing their thoughts and feelings. For private issues such as sexuality, online bulletin boards allow for respondents sharing with others while preserving their anonymity. Journal entries also provide the privacy required to share for a longer time span than a 1 hour in-depth interview. In person in-depth interviews may be more appropriate when stigma associated with topics may discourage respondents from sharing in a group setting. For example, some HIV objectives may be better addressed through in-person one-on-one when the respondent's history is explored. Ethnographic methodology is well suited to address sensitive topics as the respondents are in the comfort of their own setting.

The flow and design of the discussion guide are especially important. A gradual easing into the topic will create a comfortable environment for sharing increasing depth of feelings. The timing allocated to each section needs to also allow for the expression of some emotions and the validation of those respondent feelings by the researcher. A built-in flexibility in the order of the research topics will accommodate the respondents to reveal themselves at their own pace and spontaneously in their own order.

The vocabulary used in the research instrument needs to be most respectful and reflect the verbal reality commonly used by the respondent profile. Adapting to regional colloquialisms will add to the overall comfort of the research interview.

Logistics

The recruiting instruments needs to be particularly attentive to screen with consideration and offer ample reassurances of the anonymity of the research effort. Offering a brief agenda of the topics to be covered either in the recruiting phase or at the onset of the research exercise will invariably increase the comfort level of the respondent to reassure them that they are highly capable of participating in the study. The actual recruiting can reach out to advocacy groups, special interest groups and online specialized groups for their endorsement, thus contributing greatly to the credibility of the research being done. A sharing of a portion of the study results can encourage this type of collaboration.

Increasingly, research facilities are recognizing the need for less business like settings for researching sensitive topics. More friendly settings mimicking living rooms are frequently used for a more relaxed and less corporate setting. Flexible seating configurations also accommodate respondents with restricted mobility encountered in some health related research.

Catering needs can easily be adapted for respondents by providing more nutritious items during the regular meal hour interviews or healthy snack alternatives for patients likely to require food to take their medication. Another example would be to provide fruit and cheeses for diabetic patients as opposed to the common cookie/muffin offerings.

Timing the fieldwork during appropriate field windows can be crucial. One would avoid fielding any financial related topics during the income tax filing season for example. Ensuring there are no conflicts with special events will not only increase the response rates of our recruits and overall participation, but can also send the message that their input is valued to the extent that their schedule guides our own.

The combined efforts of providing a safe, nurturing environment will clearly demonstrate the importance we place on their wellbeing during the research process.

Debrief

The debrief task encompasses that done with the respondent, the client, the researchers and the support staff. When in a situation where sensitive topics will be discussed, consider the following:

- ❑ Begin by asking participants to list members of their support network and coping mechanisms they have developed in the research preamble.
- ❑ At the conclusion of the research event, acknowledge that the discussion may have stirred up some emotions for them and remind the respondents of their support system and offer some additional suggestions from community networks and associations.
- ❑ Be attentive to the emotional needs of their clients and peripheral staff viewing or supporting the research project. Allowing for thorough debriefs with all observers as soon as possible after the fieldwork will enable them to vent any stirred emotions.
- ❑ Last but not least, the researchers themselves need to have an outlet for venting their own emotions and thoughts on the sensitive issue. Colleagues or any person of trust will provide this opportunity for releasing emotions to allow for a more objective perspective on the findings.

Reporting

The confidentiality of our respondents is always top of mind but becomes particularly critical with sensitive issues. Respondents will need to be reassured that their sharing will be respected and kept anonymous. Getting permission to use any portion of their input as testimonials for the clients is mandatory and standard practice in research circles.

Sensitive topics research tends to elicit a wider range of emotional nuances. Reporting these nuances may be a challenge but definitely critical in the need to develop more in-depth strategic implications.

The tone of the report should not be exploitative but rather supportive of the respondents' reality with the view to improve their situation.

Closing Comment

The resulting satisfaction of knowing the respondents are well represented and respected far outweighs the additional attention and skill set required in all phases of the research process. Seeing respondents of a focus group leave the research facility and head to the nearest coffee shop to continue sharing their experiences is extremely rewarding for the researcher but most importantly a great indicator that the research process had far reaching positive impacts for respondents.