



Evaluation Take Aways

Free Evaluation Technical Assistance from the Staff of ACET, Inc.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

‘Anonymity’ and ‘confidentiality’ are often used together and some individuals have the impression that they are synonymous, but they aren’t. However, both terms do refer to ways in which evaluators and researchers protect information that participants have shared. In this *Evaluation Take Away* we summarize:

- Definitions of both anonymous and confidential;
- Difference between the two terms; and
- Importance of anonymity and confidentiality.

What are Anonymity and Confidentiality?

‘Anonymity’ exists when participants – and the information they have shared – cannot be identified. No one, including the evaluator or researcher, knows which response came from which participant *and* no records exist to connect participants with their responses.

By contrast, ‘confidentiality’ exists when participants and the information they share could be identified, but their identity is protected. Under conditions of confidentiality, evaluators and researchers know which participant said what, but they do not identify participants’ comments to protect participants’ identity.

What is the Difference Between Anonymity and Confidentiality?

To explore the difference between anonymity and confidentiality, let’s use the example of a survey. When evaluator distributes a paper-and-pencil survey and no information on participants’ identities is collected on the survey, the participants can be assured that their responses are anonymous. Because participants never reveal their identities to the evaluator, participants can be assured that their names or identifying information *and* any responses they provide will never be shared with the greater public.

If, however, an evaluator asked participants to put their names or an ID code on a survey, the survey would no longer be anonymous because someone (i.e., the evaluator or researcher) would be able to link participant’s names with their responses. Although the survey would not be anonymous, the evaluator would keep the survey responses confidential by aggregating data and carefully editing quotes to remove identifying information and sharing quotes without participants’ names.

Note that any data collection that is anonymous is also confidential. But data collected confidentially is not anonymous.

Why are Anonymity and Confidentiality Important?

Evaluators and researchers are very interested in obtaining accurate and honest opinions from participants. But obtaining accurate and honest opinions becomes a challenge when evaluators and researchers have to ask sensitive questions about participants’ experiences. For instance, participants might be hesitant to share whether or not they used illegal drugs or past mental health treatment, especially if the information could jeopardize their job, benefits, or social standing. Keeping participants’ information anonymous and/or confidential is one way to ensure that their responses are accurate.

In addition, evaluators and researchers have an ethical responsibility not only to provide accurate information to their clients but also to protect the “security, dignity and self-worth”¹ of participants. Part of protecting participants includes minimizing any potential risk or harm that might occur when they share their experiences with others, including the evaluator or researcher. Collecting information in a way that is anonymous or confidential is one tool evaluators and researchers use to protect participants.

¹ Principle D. Respect for People. American Evaluation Association. (2004). *Guiding principles for evaluators*. Retrieved from: <http://www.eval.org/publications/GuidingPrinciplesPrintable.aspx>

When is Evaluation or Research Anonymous or Confidential?

In general, if there is no way to link a participant with their data, the information is anonymous. For instance, if a participant completes a paper-and-pencil survey without sharing their name or other personally identifying information (e.g., address or phone number, Social Security or other identifying number, license plate number) then the information is anonymous.

Most other forms of data collection are generally confidential because someone somewhere knows who said what. For instance, attendees of professional conferences may be asked to complete an online survey about their experience at the conference. If the attendee received an invitation targeted to their email address or if their IP address was tracked, the survey would not be anonymous but would likely be confidential. Interview and focus group data would also be confidential but not anonymous.

It is important to note that some data collected in a confidential/non-anonymous fashion can be made anonymous through de-identification or aggregation. For instance, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) collects data on U.S. students' educational progress.² Although NCES collects personal details, that information is removed from the file (data points have been "de-identified") before data points are made available to researchers for analysis. In addition, state departments of education often de-identify mandatory test results prior to sharing results with the general public. By de-identifying the data, evaluators and researchers can investigate and explore the data for meaning without compromising the identity of individual students.

Data can also be made anonymous through aggregation. When participants' responses are reported only after they are aggregated participant identity can be protected. Aggregating data is particularly useful when reporting the results of interviews: The evaluator or researcher knows what each individual interviewee contributed but, by aggregating the interview results, the identity and contributions of individuals cannot be deduced.

Resources

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Joinson, A. (1999). Social desirability, anonymity, and internet-based questionnaires. *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers*, 31, 433-438.

Tourangeau, R. & Yan, T. (2007). Sensitive questions in surveys. *Psychological Bulletin*, 133, 859-883.

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² National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Additional information available at: http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/tdw/database/secondary_use.asp