



Q R C A *IDEAS & TOOLS
FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH*

VIEWS

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The Sleepover:

MODERATOR-LESS RESEARCH WITH KIDS AND TEENS

**BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS
CHALLENGING THE ESSENCE
OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

**SOCIAL MEDIA
CONVERSATIONS...
MINING FOR INSIGHTS**

**WEBCAM
FOCUS GROUPS...
BEST PRACTICES**



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How NOT to Conduct Research: THE AVERAGE CITIZEN SPEAKS OUT

live in the suburb of Seattle, Washington, called Mercer Island. And yes, it is an island in the middle of a lake. This is a small residential community (population of 20,000) of “Islanders.” One of my favorite pastimes is to read the editorial section of our local newspaper. I find it very interesting to see what topics really get my fellow Islanders frustrated enough to actually write a letter to the editor. Typically, they complain about political yard signs, a disagreement with the installation of a new traffic light or aggravation at people who let their dogs run off-leash.

Somewhat surprising to me, I now find myself quite frustrated about a recent article that I am compelled to share. A fellow Island resident (let’s call him John) had received a notice, via U.S. Mail, to participate in a transportation survey sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation. He was asked to track his trips outside the home for two days, and in return, he would receive a \$15 gift card. In his article, John admits that he would have completed the two-day transportation diary for free.

So far, so good... John is our perfect respondent: he understands the point of the research (traffic is a huge problem in the Seattle area); he sees value in providing the information; and he is happy to participate. The data-collection materials are perfect. The only problem is that the research company contracted to do this work is not prepared, and John’s experience as a participant goes downhill. Fast.

As you read on, keep in mind QRCA’s Code of Member Ethics, principle #8: QRCs should *“treat respondents with respect and consideration, and at all times to conduct themselves in such a manner as to reflect favorably on the profession which they represent.”* You too, will wish these researchers had done the same.

After completing his two-day travel diary (including the method of transportation, time of departure, arrival and destination information), John tried over several days to log onto the website to submit his information, with no success. He then read through the mailed materials to find the name of the research company, and then he gave them a call. He was told that “many, many people” were unable to get onto the website, but the researcher would take his information over the phone. Preferring to drop his completed form in the mail, John was told that the research company was not prepared to accept the information by mail.

Instead, the researcher asked John to start reading aloud all of the diary entries he had logged. About half way through the first day’s diary, the researcher told him that the computer system had “frozen up” and would not move to the next page. John was provided a number to call for systems support. After placing the call, he was told that they were not sure why the computer froze, but that it had been fixed and that John would receive a call from the researcher soon. At the time of the article’s publication, it had been two weeks, and John had still not heard back from the researcher.

Most participants would not go to this trouble to submit the information. After multiple visits to the website and two phone calls, John gave up. Why would John want to participate in any future research following this frustrating experience?

Interestingly, the “multi-level failure” of the research contractor’s data-collection process was not what had John most upset. Rather, he was astute enough to be concerned about how the “data collected will be used by regional experts for public policy decisions.” It was obvious to John that there were other participants who were unable to get their data recorded and others who might have been able to submit only partial data, putting the usefulness/validity of the collected data in serious question.

What I find most frustrating, which caused me to get on my soapbox, is the fact this research study was handled so poorly that it triggered an average citizen to take the time to speak out and share his concerns. It is critical that the research we conduct, no matter the methodology, exceed our industry standards and maintain the ethics to which we all subscribe.

Even when you start with a great methodology, an easy-to-complete “assignment” and the best intentions, it is critical that all aspects of the research process are carefully planned. Any contingencies need to be accounted for. Not only do we want John to always have a good experience and to feel that his voice is being heard, but as researchers we all need to take a stand in our own work. It is our responsibility to ensure that our participants are well respected, that the experience they have is positive and that the data being collected are valuable. The results we provide are only as good as the upfront planning. As I like to say, “garbage in, garbage out.” 