

Privacy and Confidentiality: Eleanor Gerber's Legacy Research

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Definitions

- Privacy
 - Does the Census Bureau have the right to ask?
- Confidentiality
 - Does the Census Bureau protect the data once we have it?

Landscape

- U.S. Census Bureau has been interested in privacy and confidentiality since the beginning (1790).
- Much research has taken place since the 1970s, both qualitatively and quantitatively (see Mayer, 2002).
- Eleanor's contribution was largely in an ethnographic approach to understanding these concerns.

“We found relatively unstructured conversations with respondents to be the most appropriate method of eliciting the full web of ideas in the most naturalistic way possible.” (Gerber, 2001, pg. 371).

The privacy context of survey response: An ethnographic account (Gerber, 2001)

- Situational Decision Making: reactions to confidentiality are embedded in R's understandings about privacy in general and this is recreated for each request.
 1. **Sponsorship and Authenticity: Who** is making the request, and whether they have a legitimate right to ask the anticipated questions
 2. **Relevance: What** the data will be used for, and preconceived notions of data sharing
 - Rs can be motivated to give even sensitive data if they perceive a personal or community good.
 - Conversely, they may fear negative consequences (e.g., loss of control of data).
 - Belief of intergovernmental data sharing (i.e., the big government computer)
- R's privacy concerns interpenetrate with confidentiality concerns.

Respondents' Understanding of Confidentiality Language (Gerber, 2003)

1. Context is key and we often don't know a R's full context.
2. Small differences in wording can cue associations that affect trust. This could cause the mixed results seen in experimental testing.
3. Assumptions (like of gov data sharing) heavily influence perception of confidentiality claims.
4. Respondents are comforted by "evidence" like legal citations or process descriptions.
5. Individual differences are strong. "Almost every element of each of these statements is problematic to someone."
6. Understanding the language of the statements is only half of the battle. Understanding processing/inference is the rest.

Respondents' Understandings of Confidentiality in a Changing Privacy Environment (Gerber and Landreth, 2007)

- Keep it simple but provide a way for someone to get more info.
- Continued belief in government data sharing above and beyond what is promised in confidentiality pledges.
- Move towards privacy notices being commonplace.
- Effects of data breaches and other political current events on confidentiality concerns.

Fast Forward a Few Years

Qualitative P&C Research

Year	Name of Study	N	Type of Study	Reason for study
2012	Federal Statistical System Public Opinion Survey Focus Groups	45	Focus groups	Develop questions for public opinion survey
2014	P&C Census Test Focus Groups	39	Focus groups	Investigate privacy and confidentiality concerns
2015	P&C Census Test Focus Groups	52	Focus groups	Investigate privacy and confidentiality concerns
	Respondent Confidentiality Messaging	303	Web probing	Test respondent-facing privacy and confidentiality messaging
		40	Cognitive interviews	
2016	P&C Census Test Focus Groups	57	Focus groups	Investigate privacy and confidentiality concerns
	Confidentiality Pledge Testing	360	Web probing	Develop and test new confidentiality pledge
		30	Cognitive interviews	
2017	Re-Identification Survey Cognitive Test	28	Cognitive interviews	Test questionnaire about privacy concerns
2018	Privacy Act Cognitive Testing	38	Cognitive interviews	Test language required by Privacy Act

Highlights from 2012-Present

Themes from Qualitative Data

- Expectations of privacy and data security
- Expectations and perceptions of data linkage and sharing

Expectations of Privacy

- People think the government has access to everything that any agency collects at any time
 - “It goes in their computer memory banks and they can pull up anything on you.” (African-American, 50+, Savannah, 2015)
 - “Well, I think once you pay taxes, that’s it. Your information is available to any Federal agency that wants it.” (Maricopa, 50+, White, 2015)
- Perception of age differences in expectations of privacy
 - Younger generation has “put themselves out there” and made their own information public. (Re-Identification, 2017)
- Census data is sometimes seen as available/googleable
 - “I don’t think really I do because the questions that they ask me are stuff like practically – if someone was good at hacking computers or anything, they could probably find that through Facebook.” (18-29, White, Maricopa 2015)
 - General sense that information is “already out there.”

Perceptions of Data Sharing/Linkage

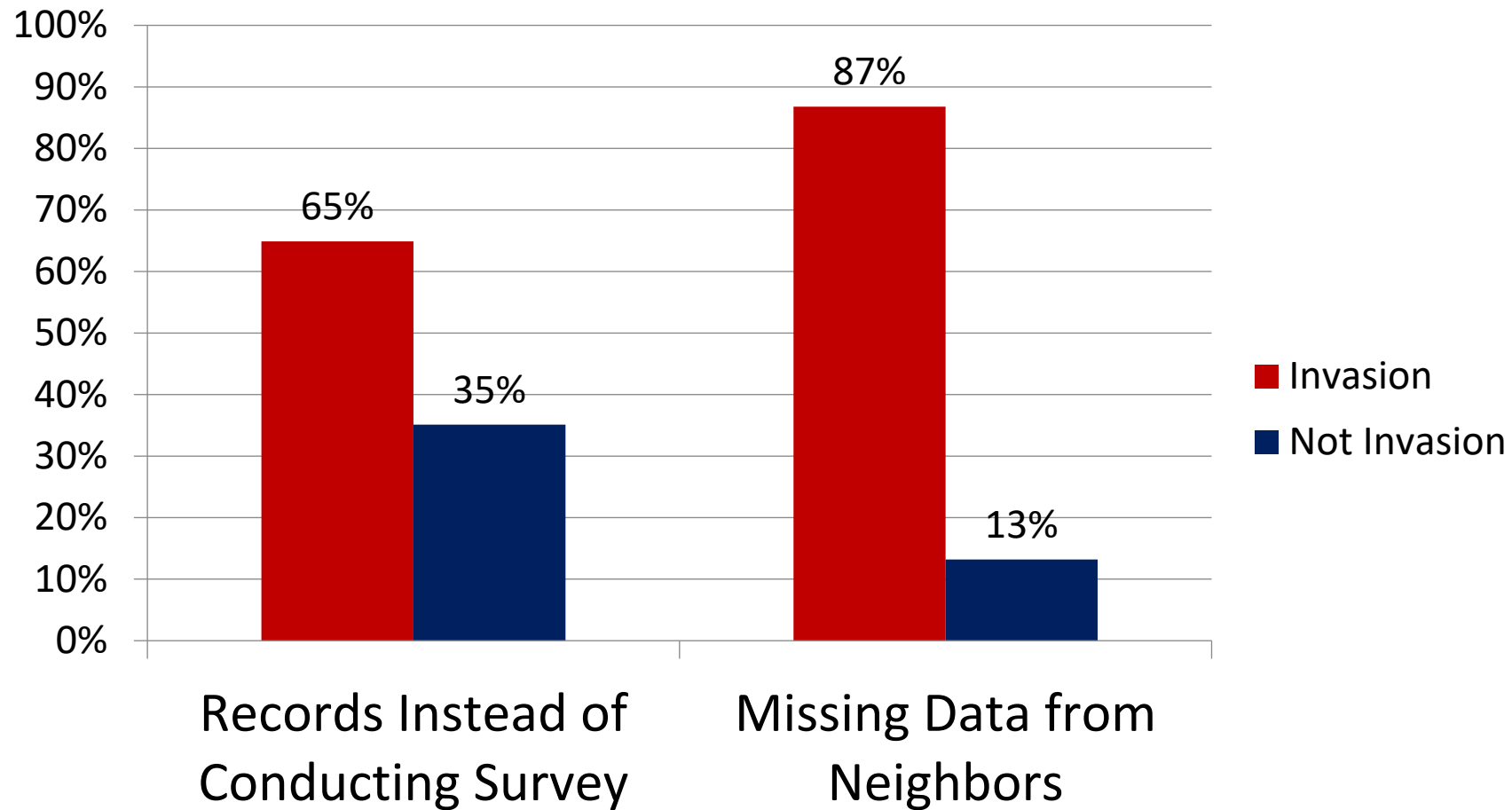
- Assumption that sharing is already happening
 - “It’s been proven that the NSA was caught spying on American’s illegally so, I think it’s safe to assume that the government is sharing the information between agencies. I mean, that’s a given.” (50+ White, Savannah 2015)
- Perceived as loss of control over their information
 - “But if I don’t give my personal information to anyone, then I don’t feel like the next person ought to be doing it either. I want to be the one that gives it out and not just your random person or organization or whatever. If I give it to specific people or whatever then that’s where it should stay until I authorize for it to be elsewhere.”

Continuing Legacy of P&C Research

Name of study	General description
2012-2018 Federal Statistical System Public Opinion Survey	Questions were placed on the Gallup Nightly Poll (RDD) to monitor trends in trust in the Federal Statistical System.
2020 Census Privacy and Confidentiality Study	A mailout survey with phone and in-person follow-up, specifically examined privacy and confidentiality views toward the census.
2020 National Privacy Concerns Survey	An online survey sampled from an address-based, probability-based frame, focused on how concerned respondents were about the privacy of individual items on the census.
2020 Census Tracking Survey	A dual RDD-probability and non-probability-web survey, collected data on views towards data confidentiality, among other topics.

A Peek at the Quantitative Collection...

Privacy Perceptions Depend on Context



Summary

- Through many of the same techniques that Eleanor used, we've seen many of the same themes persisting:
 - Context is key
 - Preconceived notions impact understanding
 - By understanding R's beliefs, we can craft questions and statements that are more easily understood.
- Stay tuned for results from the quantitative studies.

Thank you!

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