Research and Publishing Ethics

Abstract: Researchers encounter issues of ethics at all stages of the research process. The trend is for publications to report these, but this can present challenges. This presentation will discuss ten of the most commonly-encountered issues in social sciences: anonymity and confidentiality; the treatment of vulnerable groups; privacy and data security; researcher safety; taking sides in research and the ethics of being ‘critical’; inducement; overpromising; covert research; when research changes people; and relationships to research ethics committees. Examples of why they matter will be drawn from cases that have general relevance.
1. Anonymity and confidentiality

- People being researched do not necessarily want others to know that they have taken part in a research project. For example, people may agree to take part in a study of gambling only if the researcher promises them anonymity. Researchers may give participants pseudonyms, sometimes allowing participants to choose their own pseudonyms.

- People being researched do not necessarily want others to know what they have revealed to researchers. For example, material provided by people being researched after they have said ‘off the record’, or ‘in confidence’, is not intended for wider consumption, even if the person being researched has been anonymised.
1. Anonymity and confidentiality

- But there is more to anonymization than simply giving research participants pseudonyms. People may be identifiable by their role, even if they and their town are given pseudonyms. Vidich and Bensman’s Small Town in Mass Society called the community they studied ‘Springdale’, but people in that town knew where it was and who the School Principal was, even though the book didn’t name him.

- Care is also needed regarding confidentiality. People do not necessarily appreciate the consequences of what they reveal to researchers. Nor do researchers! Care is needed about what is put in the public domain, because once it is there it is hard to take back.
2. The treatment of vulnerable groups

- Anonymity and confidentiality matter generally and are routinely offered by researchers. However, they have particular importance for social groups identified as ‘vulnerable’, such as children and people with learning difficulties.

- As a safeguard for the protection of vulnerable groups, consent for participation in research may be required from parents or other people who have responsibility for the welfare of a vulnerable individual. But such arrangements may generate situations that are ‘tricky’ and which different researchers will respond to differently.
2. The treatment of vulnerable groups

‘one child who tried very hard to be interviewed because his parents hadn’t returned a form and, and his teacher knew that. The second week I was in the school this child brought in a signed form which the teacher asked to see and said “That’s not your parent’s signature is it?” you know, so this poor child was saying in lots of ways “I want to talk to this person” and couldn’t because of this consent process’ (Focus Group 5)
2. The treatment of vulnerable groups

- Conversely, gatekeepers may engineer ‘vulnerable’ people being opted in to research:

- ‘I was kind of troubled on occasion about their motives for consent... one left after two minutes, he said “I don’t want to do this any more but I was told it would affect my parole. Now, you know, I’d been very clear in all the literature I’d sent out that [it would not] but clearly it’s, you know, whoever was in charge of him had, had said that and that was disappointing’ (Focus Group 2)

- From R Wiles et al.’s ESRC-funded project ‘Informed consent and the research process’
3. Privacy and data security

- People’s right to privacy extends beyond the right to decline to take part in a research project and the right not to answer questions they prefer not to.

- If someone invites a researcher into their home to conduct an interview, it should not be assumed that they have consented to the researcher treating their impressions of that home and its inhabitants as data that can be reported.

- Similarly, people going about their everyday lives may not appreciate ethnographic researchers observing them and reporting their assessments.
3. Privacy and data security

- ‘A small elite of red-faced men with large stomachs, large Fords and tinselly wives with long fingernails patronize the Playa Club on Minster Cliffs and drink many gins before their steak or scampi and chips’ (R Pahl Divisions of Labour, Blackwell, 1984, p.154).

- Privacy can also be compromised if data that have been collected are not kept securely, for example by using encrypted files. If data are made available to other researchers, the terms and conditions of this need to be specified.

- In some fieldwork settings, particular care has to be taken regarding data security.
4. Researcher Safety

‘Now it is important to establish right away that the possibility of a serious bear attack on the Appalachian Trail is remote... Black bears rarely attack. But here’s the thing. Sometimes they do... That doesn’t happen often, but - and here is the absolutely salient point - once would be enough’ (B Bryson, A Walk in the Woods, Doubleday,1997, pp.23-24).
Researcher safety is not always considered as an ethical issue, but sending researchers out into dangerous fieldwork situations does raise ethical concerns. These may be conflict zones, but can also be apparently innocuous settings. It is important that these issues are aired in reports on research.

5. Taking sides in research and the ethics of being ‘critical’

- As social sciences have developed, very different positions have developed on whether researchers should take sides.

- Proponents of the position of ‘ethical neutrality’ argue that science and politics are separate and should be kept separate. From this point of view, it is important that the possibility is there of researchers’ findings going against what their political values would lead them to want to find. Without this, the credibility of their research will be open to question.

- A rival position is that researchers’ values cannot be kept separate from the research process, and that it is desirable for researchers to be clear to themselves and others about ‘whose side they are on’.
5. Taking sides in research and the ethics of being ‘critical’

- This issue is complicated by what is expected by the people being researched.
- Collaborative research approaches require working with partner groups, communities, and organizations. Research findings that are critical in some way (rather than affirming) of partners can present problems, especially if it is not clear from the outset of the research process who ‘owns’ and has control over the data collected. In the extreme this can make it difficult to publish research.
- Also, Howard Becker’s classic (1967) article ‘Whose side are we on?’ shows how this is not an easy question to answer.
5. Taking sides in research

Above all, what frustrated her critics was the fact that she was a well-off, expensively educated white woman who wrote about the lives of poor black men without expending a lot of time or energy on what the field refers to as “positionality” — in this case, on an accounting of her own privilege. Goffman identifies strongly and explicitly with the confident social scientists of previous generations, and if none of those figures felt as though they had to apologize for doing straightforward, readable work on marginalized or discredited populations, she didn’t see why she should have to. As another young professor told me, with the air of reverent exasperation that people use to talk about her, “Alice used a writing style that today you can’t really use in the social sciences.” He sighed and began to trail off. “In the past,” he said with some astonishment, “they really did write that way.” The book smacked, some sociologists argued, of a kind of swaggering adventurism that the discipline had long gotten over. Goffman became a proxy for old and unsettled arguments about ethnography that extended far beyond her own particular case. What is the continuing role of the qualitative in an era devoted to data? When the politics of representation have become so fraught, who gets to write about whom?

6. Inducement

- The question of whether participants in research should be paid, or recompensed in some other way for their participation, comes up frequently.

- For some researchers, it is a mark of respect, an acknowledgement of the time that they have given up and the trouble that they have gone to (for example, travelling to a laboratory to participate in an experiment).

- But other researchers, and members of research ethics committees whose approval is needed for research to proceed, voice concerns about money being used to ‘persuade’ people to take part.
6. Inducement
University of Leicester guidance

https://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/ethics/guidance/vulnerable-groups/children/rewards
7. Overpromising

- Related to inducement is the phenomenon of promising more results from research than it is possible to guarantee will be produced.
- Research may have the potential to produce results that bring benefits to participants and their communities, but it is not necessarily in the power of researchers to deliver such benefits.
- Policy-makers are not always persuaded of the case for change made on the basis of research (for all the talk of ‘evidence-based practice’).
- And even where research does lead to change, it can take much longer than research participants envisage.
7. Overpromising

Ferguslie Park in Paisley was chosen as Scotland’s Community Development Project in the 1970s with a view to tackling the marked disadvantage of its population through action research. Forty years on in 2016 it remained the most deprived area in Scotland, as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

https://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/SIMD
7. Overpromising

Oscar Lewis called meetings as part of his re-study of Tepoztlán and reported ‘One dignified, elderly Tepoztecan rose and said, “Many people have come here to study us, but not one of them has helped us”’ (1963: xv)
8. Covert research

- Research undertaken without the knowledge of the people being studied is rare, because of the absence of consent.
- Among justifications of covert research is the argument that some social groups are not accessible through conventional research procedures.
- Covert research has been conducted about fringe religious groups, and security staff (David Calvey’s study of bouncers in the night-time economy), amongst other examples.
- This may be combined with justifications that useful knowledge may result, challenging myths held about people whose activities are secret.
8. Covert Research

Possibly the study using covert research that has been most discussed is Laud Humphreys’ (1970) *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*. Posing as a ‘watch queen’, Humphreys noted down the car number plates of men visiting public toilets for casual gay sex, and later followed them up, in disguise, posing as a conventional researcher interested in their family lives. The majority were outwardly heterosexual. 

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tearoom_Trade
9. When research changes people

- Research can change the climate of opinion, but it can also change the lives of people who take part.
- ‘Publication of field research findings often poses ethical problems. The social scientist learns things about the people he studies that may harm them, if made public, either in fact or in their belief... one should refrain from publishing items of fact or conclusions that are not necessary to one’s argument or that would cause suffering out of proportion to the scientific gain of making them public’ (Becker 1971: 267, 284)
- Some people may consent to information about them being put into the public domain by researchers, and then later regret having done so.
9. When research changes people

The ‘7-up’ TV series that returned to a group of children who were 7 in 1964 at ages 14, 21, 28, 35, 42, 49 and 56 provides an extreme example of how being involved in research can change people’s lives and the lives of those around them,

10. Relationships to research ethics committees

- Research governance has changed significantly over the years, and the increasingly prominent role of research ethics committees divides opinion. For some people, RECs limit researchers’ ability to set their agendas, and for other critics, it is a bureaucratic obstacle that slows down the research process.

- The case for RECs is that when research was unregulated, some research took place that it is broadly accepted was unethical.

- The case can also be made that having to argue for a research project to RECs improves research design, through more careful preparation and through feedback. Not all ethical issues are immediately apparent.
10. Relationships to research ethics committees

- REC s have received extensive criticism, and are part of an on-going debate.
- REC s are aware of the criticism that they have grown out of the extension of the regulation of medical research, with its ‘scientific’ research design. There is greater engagement with the idea that the course of a research project cannot always be foreseen at the outset, perhaps because of unexpected difficulties, or serendipitous findings. As a consequence, ethical approval is not a one-off exercise but a process. Some projects employ ethics advisors throughout.
- Ethical approval and monitoring will include thinking ahead to publication.
10. Relationships to research ethics committees

‘Middletown’ (Muncie, Indiana) had been re-studied many times since the original book’s publication in 1929, but with no studies prior to Lassiter et al.’s giving attention to the city’s African American community. Committed to working with them on this study, and with procedures in place for doing so, they were ready for the debate about what to include on the front cover.
References