Research ethics and its consideration in business research

Chapter overview

This topic will introduce you to the key elements of research ethics, which will form an essential part of your consultancy proposal. You will learn how to structure and formulate this section effectively, supported by guidance on appropriate ethical approaches. Through a combination of research, discussions, and group activities, you will continue progressing with your proposal while developing a deeper understanding of ethical considerations. You will engage with key texts related to research ethics, which will help to strengthen your knowledge and critical thinking. By the end of this topic, you will be equipped to produce a draft of the research ethics section confidently.

Learning outcomes

- Appraise the value of ethics in business research
- Identify ethical considerations relevant to your project

Context section

The importance of research ethics will be explored in greater detail in the sections that follow. While many people assume that research ethics are only relevant when collecting primary data, this is a common misconception. Ethical considerations are equally crucial when working with secondary data, as such data can still involve sensitive information or affect individuals' privacy and confidentiality. In this topic, you will examine why it is important to address ethical issues in secondary data collection and learn how to manage any ethical concerns that may arise during your research.

You will also explore the concept of transparency, which has become a fundamental principle in ethical research practice. Transparency involves being open and honest about the methods, data sources, and decisions made throughout the research process. It ensures that your work can be understood, assessed, and trusted by others. Maintaining transparency strengthens the credibility and reliability of your research outcomes.

Understanding research ethics and transparency is not only essential for conducting responsible research but also plays a vital role in completing both your formative and summative assignments effectively. By developing a strong grasp of these ethical principles, you will be better equipped to approach your research with integrity and academic rigour.

1 What are ethics in business research?

'Research ethics' are the standards of researcher behaviour that guide your conduct in relation to the rights of the subjects of your research and those who are affected by it.' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023)

It is impossible to create "a set of recipes" to address every ethical conundrum; instead, researchers must make decisions based on moral standards and values (British Sociological Association, 2017)

'Researchers and ethical reviewers have an ethical basis against which to anticipate issues and risk, and exercise choice to avoid conflict and harm.' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023)

The core guidelines that direct researchers in carrying out their investigations in a responsible manner are known as research ethics. These ethical guidelines specify how researchers should communicate with participants and guarantee that their privacy, rights, and general welfare are upheld during the research. This entails limiting any possible harm, preserving confidentiality, and getting informed consent. Transparency about conflicts of interest and honesty in data collection, analysis, and reporting are other aspects of research ethics. Researchers preserve the integrity of their work by abiding by these ethical standards (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023).

It is impossible to rely exclusively on a set of guidelines or "recipes" for every case because ethical quandaries in research are frequently intricate and situation specific. Guidelines offer a framework, but in order to handle difficult situations, researchers frequently need to rely on their own moral judgment, values, and ideals. This entails weighing conflicting interests, critically assessing the possible outcomes of their actions, and considering the wider effects on participants and society. In addition to a commitment accountability, ethical decision-making necessitates introspection, empathy, and honesty. In the end, ethical research is reliant on both internal moral reasoning and external standards (British Sociological Association, 2017).

1.1 Why are business ethics important?

Ethics can be thought of as the rules that direct our actions so that we make the best decisions for everyone's benefit. Telling the truth, keeping our word, or lending a helping hand to those in need are all guided by ethics. Business ethics are equally as crucial as personal ethics and should be taken into serios consideration when collecting data (Santa Clara University, 2019).

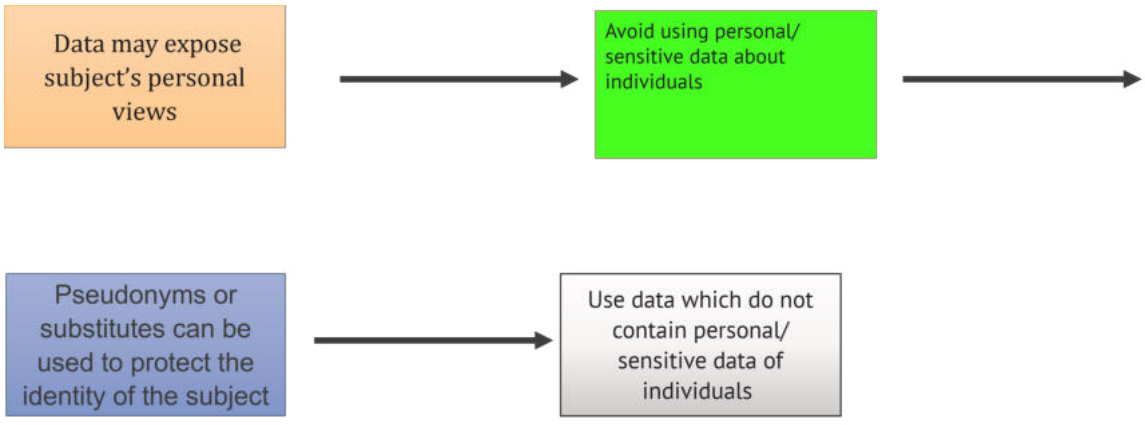
In short, business research ethics ensure that we treat others with fairness and respect and demonstrate a transparent and fair approach in our research.

The rules that guide our behaviour so that we make the best choices for everyone's benefit could be viewed as ethics. Ethics serve as a guide when it comes to speaking the truth, honouring our

commitments, and assisting those in need. Business ethics should be carefully considered when gathering data because they are just as important as personal ethics (Santa Clara University, 2019).

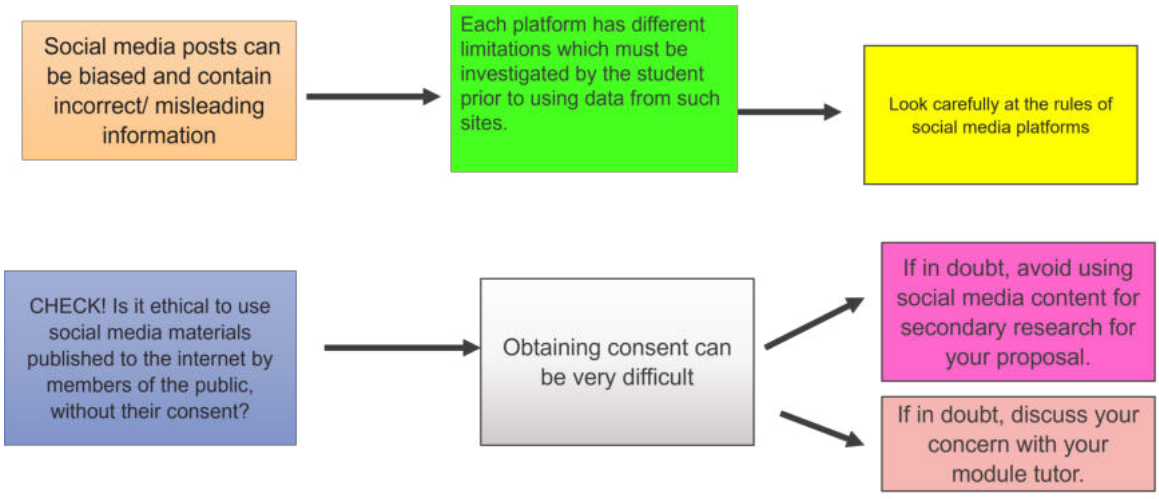
Promoting integrity throughout the whole research process requires adherence to business research ethics. By guiding your data collection, analysis, and presentation, these ethical guidelines make sure that everyone is treated with respect and decency. You can help safeguard participants' rights, preserve confidentiality, and prevent injury or misrepresentation by abiding by ethical standards. Using ethical research methods also shows that you are dedicated to accountability and openness.

1.2 Ethical challenges – personal and sensitive data



The use of private and sensitive information in secondary data collecting could raise ethical issues. It is a frequent misperception that any data on the internet can be used without any limitations. Even publicly available material might still need to be ethically considered, especially if it includes personal, sensitive or confidential data. You should refrain from using sensitive/personal/ confidential data unless it is absolutely necessary. Pseudonyms or anonymising information must be used when such data is supplied in order to preserve confidentiality, align with privacy requirements and safeguarding people's identities.

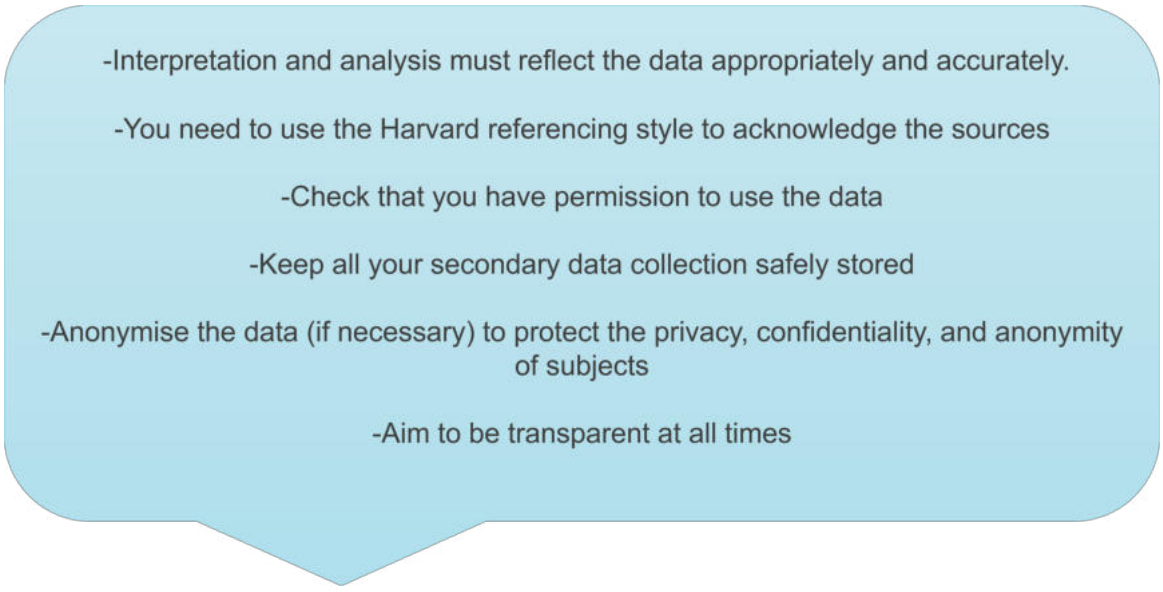
1.3 Ethical challenges – social media use



Online communities, a multitude of online platforms, and the ease of online publishing all contribute to the abundance of "public opinion" on the internet that is shared by a wide range of demographics and covers a nearly limitless number of topics. Social media stands out for offering an asynchronous platform for communication between individuals over great distances. Due to social media platforms' round-the-clock contribution policies, communication between individuals is not constrained by time zones or availability. The possibility to examine public opinion among

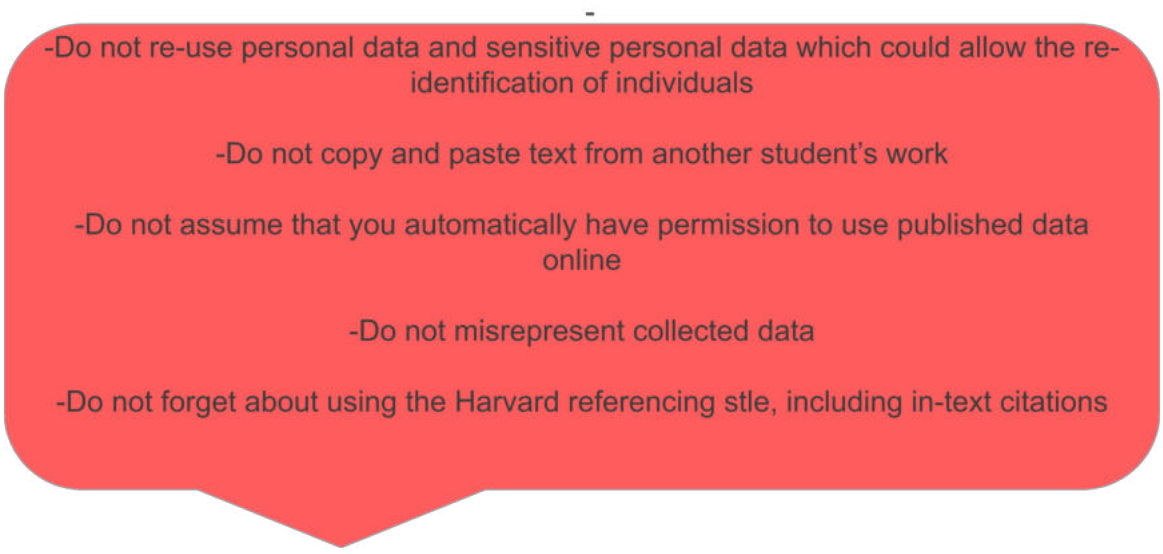
many types of people, as well as between people from different locations and backgrounds, is unmatched by social media. While accessing social media data for research purposes may be technically feasible and legal, it is essential to keep in mind that this practice may not always be regarded as ethical. The ethicality of using content that members of the public have posted online without their permission is a concern. When the content is sensitive or seems to have been published without careful planning or assessment of the size of the prospective audience, as in the case of comments in online discussion threads, this problem is intensified. Getting permission to use this kind of data is, of course, frequently exceedingly difficult, if not impossible (Benzon, N., n.d).

1.4 Dos of secondary data collection



Make sure that your interpretation and analysis appropriately represent the data and you gather secondary data from credible sources. Inaccurate findings might result from misinterpreting or distorting data, which compromises the validity and dependability of your research. You should produce reliable, valid results by correctly interpreting the data and making sure your analysis matches the original material. Another essential component of ethical research is correctly citing sources. To make sure that all data and information gathered from outside sources are appropriately referenced, acknowledging the original authors and promoting transparency, you should use the Harvard referencing style. With regards to data security, all secondary data must be stored securely. **Anonymisation is required to safeguard participant privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity if the data contains sensitive or personal information.** Finally, it is essential to keep the research process transparent.

1.5 Don’ts of secondary data collection



It is essential to avoid reusing sensitive or personal information while working with data unless specifically authorised. Unauthorised use may result in ethical and privacy issues. You must take all necessary precautions to preserve people's privacy. You must take care to avoid reusing personal information. Additionally, even if your data is anonymised, the analysis must not permit re-identification of specific persons. Throughout your research process, make sure that your collected data is secure. In order to align with research ethics, you must make sure that confidentiality and privacy are upheld. You should refrain from unethical actions such as taking text from another student's paper or falsifying the information you gather.

1.6 Ethical issues in business research

Direct link to the video can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zOJzEUEIKo

If you’re a researcher planning to use secondary data for your study, it's key that you understand and address the ethical issues involved. While most of us are familiar with the ethical considerations tied to collecting primary data, it’s easy to overlook that secondary data—information originally collected by someone else—also requires serious ethical scrutiny. Using existing datasets may seem simpler or more convenient, but you still bear the responsibility to conduct your research with integrity, transparency, and respect for the original sources and subjects.

One of the first and most serious ethical concerns you must consider is plagiarism. This is more than just copying and pasting text; it involves using someone else’s data, ideas, or findings and presenting them as your own. Even if data is freely available online or published in open-access journals, it does not mean you can use it without proper attribution. Plagiarism is not just academically dishonest—it’s also illegal in many contexts and can carry severe consequences, including damage to your reputation, academic penalties, or legal action. To stay on the right side of ethics, always cite your sources correctly, credit the original authors, and be transparent about where your data came from.

You also need to be mindful of consent and copyright when using secondary data. Even if you are not directly interacting with participants, it doesn’t mean you’re free to use everything you find. Many datasets, especially those containing personal or sensitive information, are protected by copyright laws or require informed consent for use. You should seek permission from the data owner or author if required, and always check the licensing terms. If data was collected with specific limitations on reuse, you are ethically obliged to respect those boundaries.

Another ethical pitfall is the modification or manipulation of data. You might be tempted to reformat or adjust the data to better fit your research needs, but you must be cautious. Changing the data in a way that alters its original meaning, context, or conclusions is unethical. Misrepresentation—whether intentional or accidental—can lead to incorrect findings and mislead

your audience. As a researcher, it's your duty to preserve the integrity of the original data. If you must reprocess or reorganize data for analysis, be sure to clearly explain your methods and ensure your changes do not distort the intent or meaning of the original work.

Another area where ethical care is needed is in handling confidentiality and anonymity. If the secondary data you're using includes personal or identifying information—such as names, locations, or institutions—you must protect that information unless you have received explicit permission to disclose it. In most cases, anonymization is a necessary step. This might include replacing names with pseudonyms, removing specific locations, or generalizing sensitive details. Disclosing identities without consent is not only unethical but may also violate data protection laws, such as GDPR or institutional review board (IRB) policies.

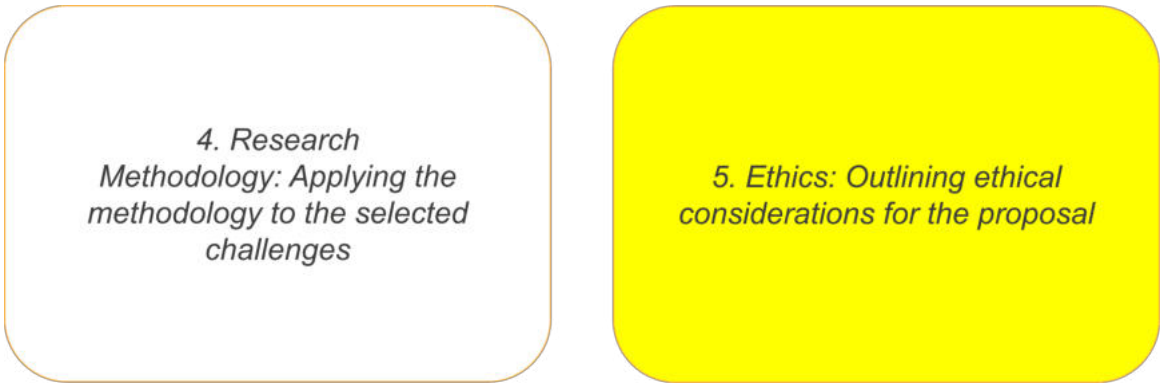
You also need to ensure that the data you're using was collected ethically in the first place. For example, if the original researcher gathered the data without informed consent, through deception, or via covert methods (such as secretly recording conversations or monitoring online behaviour without notification), then your use of that data could also be considered unethical. This applies even if the data has been published—just because something is accessible doesn't make it ethical to use. Always assess the provenance of your data and confirm that it was gathered in a manner consistent with ethical research standards.

Finally, respect the principle of participant autonomy. This means recognizing that individuals have the right to control their personal information, including how and when it's used. Even when using de-identified or anonymised data, you should be mindful of how your research might impact the people behind the data. Ask yourself: Could your work unintentionally cause harm or discomfort to any group or individual if the data were misinterpreted or de-anonymised? Are you using the data in a way that's respectful of the original context? Are you being transparent with your readers about your data sources? Have you anonymized sensitive information? Have you cited everything properly?

In summary, using secondary data in research is a powerful and efficient approach—but it comes with responsibilities. As a researcher, you must ensure that your work upholds the highest ethical standards, even when the data you're using was not collected by you. Ethical research doesn't stop at the point of data collection—it extends through every phase of your project, from planning to publication. By taking care to respect authorship, consent, accuracy, and privacy, you not only protect the rights of others but also strengthen the validity and credibility of your own research.

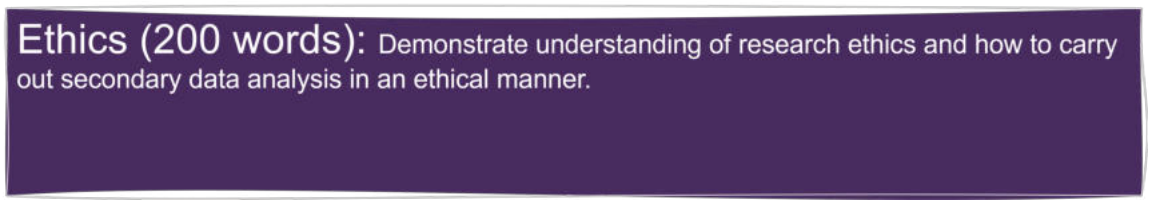
(Source: Adapted from Search Research, 2024)

2 Key components of a consultancy project



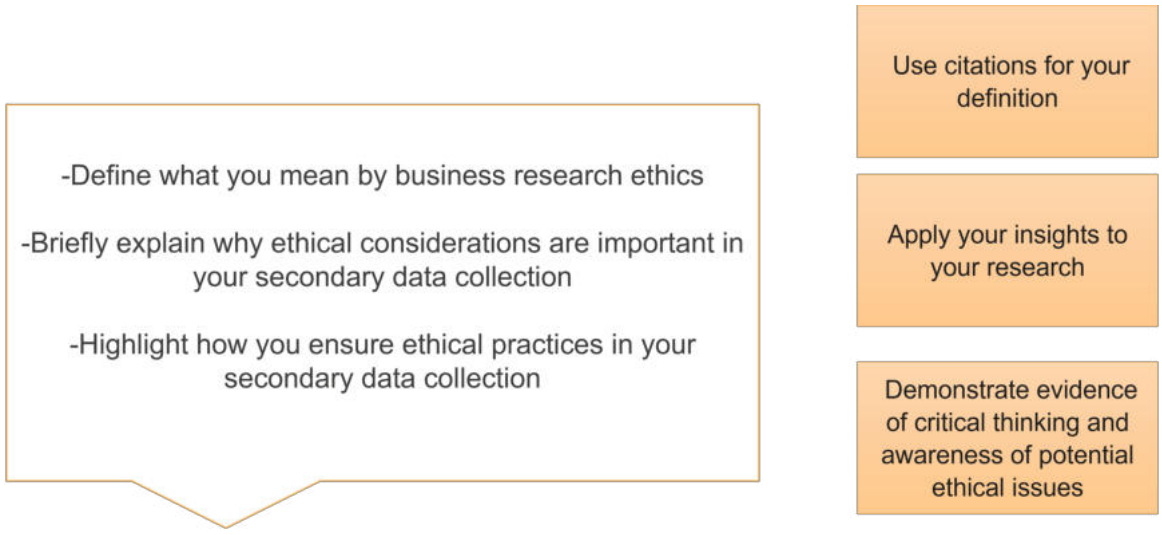
In the following section, we shall be looking at the ethics part of the consultancy proposal.

2.1 Key structure to follow



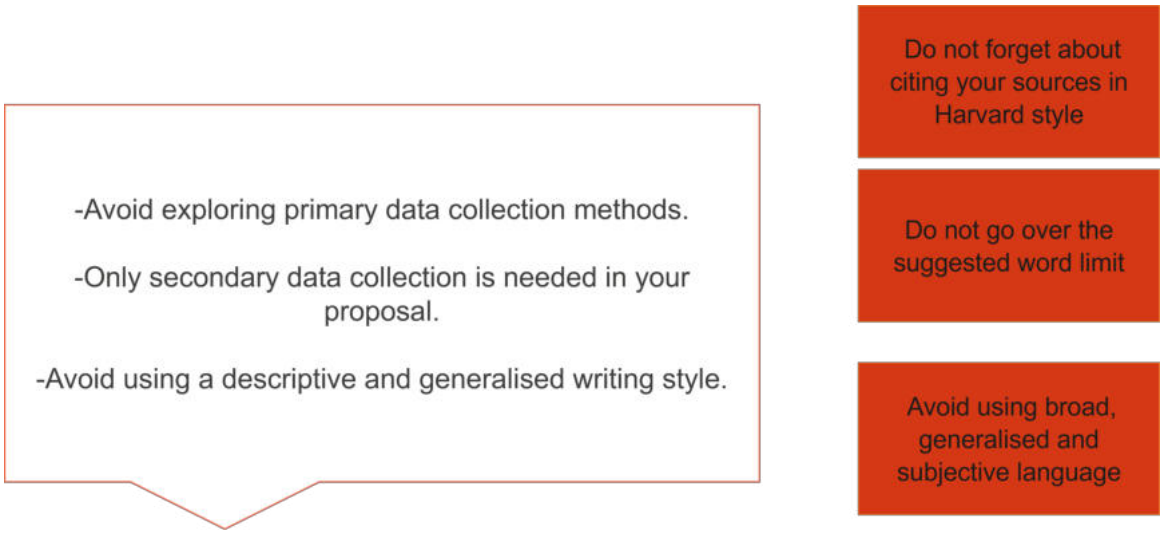
In the ethics part of the proposal, we will be asking you to demonstrate your understanding of research ethics and apply your insights to the context of your research.

2.2 How to write the Ethics part of your proposal?



You will be required to provide a definition of business research ethics along with a citation (or citations) to back it up. In the context of your secondary data collection, you will need to discuss the significance of ethical considerations. It is imperative that you avoid using generalised language when discussing ethics. Be sure to relate the ethical section to the topic and sources you have chosen. You must describe how you plan to ensure transparency and openness in your secondary data collection process. It is necessary to thoroughly consider the implications of your research decisions in order to demonstrate critical thinking and understanding of potential ethical issues. This could entail determining potential privacy issues and making sure that your data use is transparent.

2.3 How NOT to write the Ethics part of your proposal?



Focus on being precise, objective, and detailed in your statements to steer clear of generalised, subjective, and broad expressions. Use evidence and examples to back up your views rather than vague generalisations. For instance, instead of stating that research ethics are important, identify the ethical principles that apply to your work. Steer clear of subjective statements like "I think" or "I believe" and instead use evidence-based arguments supported by facts. This method helps to ensure that your writing is specific, reliable, supported by evidence, enabling you to communicate concepts objectively.

2.4 Definition of transparency

> 'Transparency is the quality of being easily seen through, while transparency in a business or governance context refers to being open and honest.' (Terrell Hanna and Wigmore, 2022)

In a corporate or governance setting, transparency refers to being open and honest, whereas transparency itself is the attribute of being easily seen through. This calls for the sharing of all pertinent information in accordance with corporate governance best practices so that others can make well-informed judgments. Transparency implies that all organisational activities must be meticulous enough to withstand public examination. Social media and other communications have made it possible for even secretive actions to become public knowledge, even when an institution makes every effort to keep them that way. Businesses are under pressure to alter their operations in order to become more transparent. Businesses and consumers alike can benefit from transparency in several ways. Among these advantages are the following ones: better connections with customers, greater confidence, improved reputation, increased staff involvement, and improved decision-making (Terrell Hanna and Wigmore, 2022).

2.5 Transparency in your research journey

Direct link to the recording can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nBCNL1TvM4

Transparency is the act of freely disclosing facts, judgments, and actions in a way that is understandable, accurate, and available to others. This notion is essential for building trust and encouraging responsibility in a variety of contexts, such as interpersonal relationships, workplaces, organisations, and governmental systems. Clear and honest communication is essential to transparency, as is making sure that team members, stakeholders, and the general public have access to pertinent data and comprehend the rationale behind choices. Transparency within an organisation could include, for example, sharing financial information, outlining corporate policies, or being forthright about impending difficulties, plans, or modifications. In governance, transparency ensures public accountability by openly sharing information about policies and expenditures, thereby strengthening people's confidence. Similarly, businesses that disclose product sourcing, pricing, and workplace policies promote ethical practices and gain consumer trust. Transparency is valuable because it can foster a culture of trust, promote

teamwork, and aid in well-informed decision-making. The primary strengths of transparency include building trust, promoting accountability, improving communication, and encouraging collaboration and innovation. Transparency shows that you are willing to take responsibility for your actions and are dedicated to acting in an ethical manner. Transparency must be used carefully, though. Oversharing can result in misunderstandings, mistrust, or unforeseen repercussions, especially when it comes to private or irrelevant information. Effective transparency, then, entails providing the appropriate information to the appropriate individuals at the appropriate time in the appropriate manner. By doing this, you guarantee understanding, respect for one another, and a more solid basis for collaboration and responsible decision-making (Drew, 2025).

Transparency is essential not only in business and corporate settings but also in your academic journey. A transparent approach will help to ensure that you align with ethical principles throughout your research. You must properly cite your sources using the Harvard referencing style in order to uphold academic integrity and ethical standards in your study. This enables people to track down your information and demonstrates respect for the original authors. Since plagiarism damages your reputation and is against academic regulations, it is imperative that you turn in original work and refrain from copying and pasting from other students' submissions. Additionally, you should refrain from falsifying data since this can result in incorrect results and undermine the credibility of your research. All secondary data must be stored safely. Finally, you are encouraged to actively participate in in-person classroom teachings sessions, where sharing your knowledge and asking questions can improve your understanding and foster a cooperative, stimulating learning atmosphere for all.

3 Ethical guidelines

The subject of this article is secondary analysis, which is believed to raise few ethical concerns in the course of research. It specifically draws on the experience of a collaborative research project that utilized secondary analysis of qualitative data gathered as part of an ongoing international longitudinal study, Young Lives (www.younglives.org.uk), in addition to a more comprehensive review of regulatory guidance on research ethics and scholarly debates. Secondary analysis comes in a variety of forms and offers various benefits. Although regulatory frameworks may indicate otherwise, it is a more intricate ethical dilemma. Whether data is kept in a public repository or not, ethical concerns need to be addressed.

Achieving a contextual understanding of the data by identifying and reducing the risks of misinterpretation is one of these concerns, along with duties to participants and the original researchers. For primary researchers who want to archive their data as well as researchers beginning a qualitative secondary analysis, the problems raised here are intended to stimulate preparation and consideration in order to advance ethical research practice. Lastly, our experience highlights the importance of building and maintaining reliable ties between primary and secondary researchers.

The regulation of data sharing

The Oxford English Dictionary cites John Dryden's translation of Plutarch's life in the 17th century to place the etymology of the word "archive" (as a noun) in ancient Greece. However, archiving has only just been linked to data access and main empirical research data. According to Mauthner (2012), confidentiality, data protection, and informed permission have historically been used as justifications for the expectation that researchers remove data after a study is complete. The number of primary databases that funders will be willing to support is becoming more and more constrained, according to Thorne's 1998 article (p. 547). Arguments regarding the advantages of data sharing and economic factors have also contributed to this change.

Data archiving has become a standard requirement for research funders. This expectation is outlined in the ESRC Research Data and Open Access Policies. According to the ESRC Open Access Policy:

In particular, we demand that research data from studies supported by the ESRC be responsibly and promptly released to the scientific community. It is anticipated that grantees of ESRC grants will utilise current data management standards and make data accessible for future reuse (ESRC 2010, p3).

Guidelines for ethical research practices have helped to change expectations in recent years. Previously, it was assumed that it was morally right to destroy data after a study was completed. However, since 1995, ESRC policy has included an apparent expectation that data will be archived and made publicly available to other researchers through sharing and archiving. The prevailing view is that information ought to be disseminated, and the arguments made appear to be based on moral ethics.

Secondary data analysis

According to Janet Heaton (1998, 2004), defining "secondary data analysis" is difficult. She described the term in a 1998 article as including the use of data that has already been gathered for a previous study to pursue a different research interest from the original work. This could be a new research question or a different viewpoint on the original question.

There are numerous and diverse ethical issues brought up by secondary analysis of any type of data. Up until now, most of the attention has been on the ethics of archiving qualitative data, such as proper consent procedures (e.g., Van den Eynden et al. 2011).

The possibility of misrepresenting or distorting data analyzed remotely due to a lack of contextual awareness and local expertise is one of the significant ethical issues associated with cross-cultural research (Fossheim, 2013). A secondary analysis's inherent distance from the original data is likely to increase the risk of misinterpretation due to a lack of contextual knowledge (e.g., Parry and Mauthner, 2004, Mauthner, 2012, Carusi and Jirotka 2009). As Josselson (2004, p3) writes:

Because meanings cannot be grasped directly and all meanings are essentially indeterminate in any unshakeable way, interpretation becomes necessary, and this is the work of the hermeneutic enterprise.

Overcoming ethical challenges

A fundamental principle of research ethics, which can be traced back to Socratic ideas of virtue and, more recently, to international ethics codes like Nuremberg (1947) and Helsinki (1964), is that research should not do harm. Regarding secondary use, this refers to the harm caused by misrepresentation and stigma or discrimination. A thorough comprehension of contexts is essential to reducing the possibility of misunderstandings and misrepresentations that arise from the examination of secondary data. This also means that the secondary researcher must be mindful of the boundaries of knowledge, being careful to identify what cannot be known and what should not be assumed. Nevertheless, since many things are still unknown in primary research, this awareness of the boundaries of contextual understanding can be viewed as an ethical requirement for both primary and secondary researchers with regard to their duties for ethical practice in data use and re-use.

Anonymization and anonymity

Since it is becoming harder to provide complete anonymity due to information technology advancements and the possibility of data linkage, the boundaries of anonymization have come to be recognized more and more in relation to biobanking and DNA data (Nuffield 2012). Concerns of anonymization are similarly problematic in qualitative research. The UK Data Archive 10 (2011) advises against mentioning names throughout the interview in order to protect the participants. These guidelines also recommend that other personal identifiers be included: "names of friends, relatives, places, institutions...."

Conclusion

Data sharing has the potential to be very beneficial for all of the reasons listed by Van den Eynden et al. (2011) and others, including (but not limited to) cost. But sharing and reusing data is a difficult ethical issue that needs to be handled in light of "our ethical and moral responsibility as researchers" (Mauthner 2012, p173). These moral and ethical obligations fall on us as primary or secondary researchers, or somewhere in between.

Funders like the Research Councils view data sharing as the "default" strategy, thus researchers may overlook the intricate ethical issues that come with this part of the research process. This approach runs the danger of making researchers ill-prepared to handle ethical issues like the ones mentioned above, whether they are sharing their data or doing secondary analysis.

The time and cost required for the task are affected by practical concerns that must be taken into account for studies that intend to archive and distribute their data as well as studies that intend

to reuse the data of other researchers. For instance, primary researchers must think about how to guarantee adequate (informed) consent for ambiguous future uses and to guarantee the resources required to prepare qualitative data for archiving. In order to prevent the possibility of misrepresentation, secondary researchers must make sure that their intended (re)uses are in compliance with the participants' initial consents and understandings. The issue of anonymisation is still crucial for primary and secondary analysts alike.

While posing ethical questions of their own, methods for anonymizing data during its collection (such urging participants not to disclose identifiable details of their life) may compromise the quality of primary data for potential future usage. However, when identifying information like location or unique participant traits is eliminated, complete anonymisation invariably decontextualises qualitative data, increasing the possibility of misunderstanding by the secondary analyst. While these issues are not insurmountable, they do necessitate consideration, preparation, and funding, just like any other aspect of conducting ethical research.

(Source: Adapted from Morrow, Boddy & Lamb, 2014)

4 Case study on research ethics

Researchers at Northwestern University have been using Dropbox to examine the behaviours of tens of thousands of scientists over the past two years. By analysing folder-sharing data, they discovered that the most successful scientists exhibit certain collaborative behaviours. Additionally, they released their findings in a Harvard Business Review piece on Friday.

Though not for the reason Dropbox and the researchers had planned, the study soon caught the attention of academia. Readers were particularly interested in the following sentence: "Dropbox provided us with project-folder-related data, which we combined and anonymised, for all the scientists utilising its platform between May 2015 and May 2017—a group that represented 1,000 universities." Dropbox Manager of Enterprise Insights Rebecca Hinds and professors Adam Pah and Brian Uzzi of Northwestern University Institute on Complex Systems wrote the language, which implied Dropbox had given over personally identifiable information on hundreds of thousands of users.

That section of the article was changed by the Harvard Business Review by Tuesday to state that the data was aggregated and anonymised before being provided to the researchers. "Dropbox permanently anonymised the data by making any identifying user information unreadable, including individual emails and shared folder IDs, before providing any Dropbox users' data to the researchers," a Dropbox representative told WIRED. According to Dropbox representatives, the only consent that Dropbox received from study participants was their agreement to its terms of service and privacy policy, but the company's more than 500 million users can rest easy knowing that their de-anonymized data isn't readily shared with researchers.

"Before sharing the activity data with NICO, we randomised or hashed the dataset and grouped it into wide ranges to further ensure that no identifying information could be derived," Dropbox stated. "In addition, our research partners at NICO are bound by strict confidentiality obligations." That assertion was corroborated by Pah of Northwestern, who told WIRED that neither he nor his team ever had access to any personal data or the contents of any Dropbox folders or files. Dropbox then combined folder data with Web of Science citation information, anonymised and aggregated it, and returned it for study. The Web of Science index ranks researchers based on the frequency of citations to their work.

According to Casey Fiesler, a professor in the Department of Information Science at Colorado University Boulder, folder titles and file structures may be able to be utilised to identify people even if the personal names are deleted. "Information like university ranks and number of citations were grouped into ranges," Hinds wrote in a blog post published on Friday, seemingly directly addressing that concern. Dropbox representatives claim that the methods they employed to anonymise and aggregate the data would prevent reverse identification, but they were unable to provide specifics about how that process was carried out.

However, it still seems that this study was carried out without the explicit consent of the thousands of users whose data Dropbox and the researchers accessed (according to Dropbox, the study involved data from 16,000 customers, whereas the HBR article initially claimed that 400,000 users' data was examined). A second editors' note was published by HBR late Tuesday, stating

that the researchers began with data on 400,000 "unique users" but, after integrating data from Web of Science, reduced the data set to 16,000 users. The article was also revised by HBR editors to clarify that 1,000 distinct departments, not 1,000 universities, were included.

One of the main tenets of academic research, informed consent, is what caused Facebook to face significant criticism in 2014 after it released the findings of its contentious "Emotional Contagion Study." Internal review boards, who are responsible for upholding ethical standards in research, never authorised the study. According to reports, the university where it was done deemed it IRB-exempt because the data had already been gathered by Facebook and was unidentifiable. According to Dropbox staff, this also applied to this study because the researchers received the data de-identified.

However, Fiesler and Frederik Brudy, a graduate student at the University of College London, are both troubled by the issue of consent. Brudy has also expressed his worries on Twitter. "Based on what I see in their TOS and privacy policy, and also the public reaction I've seen from other researchers who may well have had their data included in this study, their decision to provide data to outside researchers without user consent was a problem," Fiesler states.

Representatives from Dropbox told WIRED that consumers consented when they accepted the company's privacy conditions, citing a provision on the usage of data to enhance Dropbox services. According to that section: "We gather data on your account activities, such as sharing, editing, viewing, and relocating files or folders, as well as how you use the Services. We utilise this data to enhance our offerings, create fresh products and services, and safeguard Dropbox consumers. Additionally, they cited the following statement regarding data sharing with third parties: "Dropbox uses certain trusted third parties (for example, providers of customer support and IT services) to help us provide, improve, protect, and promote our Services."

Although Dropbox personnel told WIRED that the study's insights into team collaboration will help the firm build better features, it was unclear from the HBR article and the Dropbox blog post exactly how the study benefited Dropbox services.

This type of research is typically published in a peer-reviewed academic publication with explicit authorship and data provenance information. This research is extremely difficult to evaluate because it was published in a non-peer-reviewed journal. Hinds has not replied to WIRED's request for comment, and her LinkedIn and Twitter accounts were removed on Tuesday. Dropbox officials refused to connect WIRED with Hinds directly.

What is the key to a team that performs well? A player with star status? Experience of veterans? “We set out to answer questions like these in a joint study by Dropbox and the Northwestern Institute on Complex Systems (NICO),” Hinds wrote in the Dropbox blog post on Friday. Scholars like Brudy and Fiesler, however, have different enquiries. They question how long and by whom this data was accessible. Which types of Dropbox accounts—free and paid—were impacted? Are similar investigations currently underway? Will a peer review of this study be conducted? For the scientists who use Dropbox at over 6,000 universities, such responses are important.

(Source: Adapted from Dreyfuss, 2018)

Essential reading

Dreyfuss, E. (2018). Was It Ethical for Dropbox to Share Customer Data with Scientists? [online] WIRED. Available at: https://www.wired.com/story/dropbox-sharing-data-study-ethics/?utm_source[[30 April 2025].

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