



CPT898

Foundations of Social Science Research

Nov 2016

Ethics & Politics of Research

# Research Ethics

Principles and norms of research community

- *The standards of professional conduct that researchers are expected to maintain.* (Thomas & Hodge, 2010: 83)
- *The principled sensitivity to the rights of others.* (Gilbert, 2008: 146)

# Sources of Guidance

- Morally aware persons / Common-sense
- Government Policies such as:
  - Child Protection Procedures
  - Data Protection Act
- Ethical Theory
  - Consequentialism (J.S. Mill, Utilitarianism, 1863)
  - Deontology (I. Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, 1785)
- Professional Guidelines
  - British Sociological Association (BSA)
  - Social Research Association (SRA)
  - British Educational Research Association (BERA)
  - British Psychological Society, Code of Conduct for Psychologists
- Academic Literature

- Respect the rights, dignity and worth of others and avoid causing harm
- Need to consider the effects of involvement and consequences of research or its misuse for those studied and other interested parties

(Adapted from BSA Guidelines)

# Cardiff University Governance

- The University also acknowledges the importance of confidentiality as a guiding principle in research involving people, human material and human data. Cardiff University's Research Governance Framework (Statement of Principle) states that all persons involved with research
- "...have a responsibility and a duty of accountability to society, to their profession, to the University and to the funders of the research, to accept full responsibility for the professionalism and integrity of all aspects of the conduct and publication of their research..."
- Ethical awareness and conduct is one key aspect of this statement.



# Risk Calculus

# Benefits v Harms

- Do benefits of research justify any potential costs / harms?
- What are potential benefits
- What are potential risks
- How will risks be ameliorated?
- “Although sociologists, like other researchers are committed to the advancement of knowledge, that goal does not of itself, provide an entitlement to override the rights of others.” BSA Ethical Guidelines

# What counts as a benefit?

# What counts as harm?

- Emotional (affective)
- Psychological (cognitive)
- Spiritual
- Social
- Physical
- Material

# A Precautionary Approach: three standard planks of risk reduction

- Informed consent
- Anonymity
- Confidentiality





# Informed Consent

# Informed consent

- Respect the rights, dignity and worth of others and avoid causing harm
- Provide fullest information concerning nature and purpose of research (Bulmer, 2008:150)
- Identify potential benefits of individuals participation to study
- Identify risks and risk management strategies associated with participation, e.g. the arrangements for data storage, anonymisation, use of data, etc.
- Make clear who is funding the research

# Informed Consent, Cont.

- Make clear the right to withdraw from research / renegotiate participation
- Allow individuals to make informed choice as to whether to be involved in the research process
- Allow time for reflection
- Record consent – how?
  - Getting participants to sign a consent form can introduce stress, anxiety and mistrust
- Informed consent as ‘research bargain’ (see for example: Hughes, 1974)
- Signing consent form is not just gaining agreement to participation but also a statement and guarantee of researchers obligations

# Whose consent?

- Young people?
- Elderly people?
- Other vulnerable groups?
  - Consider hierarchy / power relations
- Public / Private spaces?
  - What about the internet / social media?



**Consent is ongoing process, situationally achieved in practice and not given once and for all**

# Anonymity

# Anonymity

- Don't collect data you don't need
- Don't collect identifying data unless necessary
- When transcribing remove all identifiers
- Keep data locked away / password protected
  - Data must be kept for 5 years
- When writing ensure contextual detail doesn't inadvertently allow for identification

# Some additional issues to think about?

- How will you get Access?
- Are you excluding / harming anyone on basis of:
  - Age, Gender, Education, Language, Ethnicity, Religion, Social status
- Professional / Researcher role
- Different worldviews / value systems
- Causing disruption to the local setting
- Lone researcher working



# Is a Precautionary Approach always appropriate?

# Covert Research?

- “...covert methods violate the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied. Participant or non-participant observation in non-public spaces or experimental manipulation of research participants without their knowledge should be resorted to only where it is impossible to use other methods to obtain essential data.” (BSA, 2002: 6)
- Methodological advantage more naturalistic / ecological validity
  - (Hawthorne effect) (see for example: Spicker, 2011)
  - Examples of covert studies include work on: Cult groups, mental health hospitals, juvenile gangs, police, school culture, night clubs, criminal activity, etc.

# Covert Research, Cont.

- Some Challenges
- Cannot openly investigate
- Researcher may have to use deception
  - Impact negatively on profession if discovered
  - Could damage researchers reputation
  - May generate conflict within researcher in terms of their moral selves, e.g. need to lie.
  - Practical challenges of need to manage identity
  - Exit can be a problem
  - Need to maintain ongoing pretence? (e.g. Calvey, 2008 – Bouncer).

# Informed Consent Revisited: Overt–Covert Continuum?

- Researchers often fail to provide full information
  - Need to gain access tell different participants different amounts of information
- Issue of informed consent and self presentation
  - Institutions and hierarchy
  - Organisational research core – peripheral encounters
    - E.g. Medical research / Police research /Shipboard research
- Building rapport, gaining trust, are these ways of encouraging people to forget they are being observed / researched in order to get them to open up?

(Thorne, 1980)

# Confidentiality Revisited

- What guarantees of confidentiality can / should we make?
- Criminal activity?
- Abuses of power?
- Harm to others?
- Rule breaking?
- “As we chatted I noticed that the prisoner surreptitiously put something in his mouth and swallow it. The PC did not seem to notice and I was unsure whether to mention it to him. I was concerned that if the prisoner had swallowed drugs this might have serious repercussions for both him and the officer...Eventually I decided that the potential impact on both the prisoner and the officer was primary ...and discretely mentioned to the officer what I had seen.” (Rowe, 2007:41)

# Anonymity Revisited

- What guarantees of anonymity can / should we make?
  - What about elites or participants in unique positions
- Is it always ethical to maintain anonymity?
  - What about giving voice to participants?
    - E.g. Mitchell Duneier (2001) Sidewalk

# Formal procedures: a **First** step

- You must submit an application to and receive approval from the School of Social Science Research Ethics Committee (SREC) before you start any research.
- Ethics and politics inform entire research practice and require ongoing reflexive engagement with decision making process
- “Research is a situated business and ... It is in the particular case of the here and now with participants that ethics are situationally accomplished.”

(Calvey, 2008:908)

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