Basic Research Methods: An Entry to Social Science Research

Research Ethics

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Chapter 2: Research Ethics

Being social science researchers does not give us any special powers or entitlements. We are merely citizens conducting professional work with fellow citizens who have the same rights as ourselves. We have no authority to direct the subjects of our research, and we must ensure that their engagement in our work is done freely. We do gain, however, some extra responsibilities.

Before commencing research, it is worthwhile giving some attention to the ethics required in conducting this exercise. This chapter is placed near the beginning of the book to emphasise the importance of ethics, especially because research involves new professional roles and behaviour. The chapter will look at:

- 1. a code of ethics;
- 2. the range of permissions needed to research;
- 3. researcher responsibilities;
- 4. confidentiality of information given to you;
- 5. feedback to participants; and
- 6. participatory research.

2.1 Codes of Ethics

Ethics are standards of professional behaviour. They guide us so that we act with integrity, especially towards participants in the research. They also view technical competence as an ethical obligation, which also helps ensure that we are regarded as credible when we provide research results and that our work is held in high repute.

A code of ethics sets out principles of behaviour that professionals should apply to their work. A good example comes from the American Sociological Association (1999). It lists five general ethical principles to which social scientists should adhere:

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- 1. Professional competence.
- 2. Integrity.
- 3. Professional and scientific responsibility.
- 4. Respect for people's rights, dignity and diversity.
- 5. Social responsibility.

Associated with these principles are certain professional standards. The ones most relevant to students learning to research are:

- 1. Adherence to the highest possible technical standards.
- 2. Ensuring that you are competent in your research.
- 3. Correct representation of your own expertise.
- 4. No discrimination, exploitation or harassment.
- 5. Avoidance of conflicts of interest or their appearance.
- 6. Protection of confidentiality.
- 7. Seeking informed consent.
- 8. Avoidance of plagiarism.

In practice, you need to be particularly aware of these ethical standards at certain points in your project. One point is seeking permission to research. A second relates to responsibilities as a researcher in the community. A third relates to the need for confidentiality about private information to which you might gain access. A fourth relates to feedback to the people among whom you research.

2.2 Permissions to Research

Permissions in research apply in two main areas. One is where approval is needed from authorities to carry out the project. The other is obtaining informed consent from participants.

Approval of research project is usually required first by your academic institution. Each institution will have different rules for approving your research. Find out what they are and discuss them with your superviser or course lecturer.

If your project is approved, you might need subsequent agreement from particular authorities to carry out your work in places for which they are responsible. These authorities might be senior managers of organisations in which you want to collect data, community leaders or heads of households where you want to interview.

Sometimes organisations lay out formal rules and procedures if they often receive requests to permit research. Usually, these rules are designed to prevent parts of the organisation being overloaded with research. For example, a Department of Education **[p. 17 ↓]** might often have educational researchers wanting to research in its schools. School principals complain that too much research is interrupting classes, so the department sets up procedures to vet requests. The procedures aim to ensure that the research is legitimate, the researcher has appropriate credentials, the research is consistent with departmental policy and potentially useful to the education system, it will not be disruptive and that it is ethical. The department will usually want to see the research proposal, the researcher's qualifications and supporting material from supervisers or referees. All this is legitimate. The primary responsibility of the department is to ensure that children's education is not interrupted unnecessarily.

The approval process can involve bureaucratic delays. Procedures are often slow and this can be frustrating. So, think ahead and apply as soon as possible. Sometimes too, organisations procrastinate because they do not want their activities exposed to outsiders whom they might perceive as hostile or they do not like the interruptions that research generates.

Otherwise, to be very practical, choose a research project that does not require outside approvals, for example, by researching among fellow students.

Once you are able to proceed with data collection, the main ethical issue is informed consent from participants. Before you start interviewing or testing, you should briefly:

- 1. Tell participants the purpose of the research.
- 2. Tell them what you will do with the results.
- 3. Answer their questions about the research.
- 4. Ask their permission to continue.
- 5. Respect their right to refuse to participate.

- 6. Respect their right to withdraw at any stage.

Box 2.1 is an example of a questionnaire introduction used in an international study of attitudes to the environment held by students in 12 different countries across the Asia-Pacific region. The introduction clearly explains the purpose of the survey, seeks the students' cooperation and explains the anonymous nature of the data so that there is informed consent.

Sometimes respondents are paid to participate in research. Indeed, I argued for this approach in the crime victimisation surveys. Here were we, well-paid researchers, asking for free information from people, some of whom lived in poverty. Practically as well, this would have increased cooperation and decreased our obligations to provide feedback, because we would now own the data. Some of the arguments against were self-serving but one argument persuaded. The likelihood was that if word went out in poor communities that families were being paid to answer questions, these families would suddenly become bigger. We would not be able to tell who really was a member. Thus, payment would have involved unacceptable trade-offs with validity. **[p. 18 ↓]** There was not much point in adding an ethical payment if it invalidated the research, which did have widespread potential benefits for the community.

Box 2.1 Informed Consent

Introduction to Questionnaire

'Dear student,

'This questionnaire forms part of a study of the environmental attitudes of young people we are carrying out in two cities in Australia and in a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The aim of the study is to compare environmental attitudes, knowledge and behaviour in these different cities and countries. We hope that the study will help to develop greater international understanding so that people across the region can work together more effectively. Your contribution is greatly valued.

'Before you answer the questionnaire, please read these instructions carefully.

'Please note that this is not a test and we do not ask for your name. Your answers will not be graded or seen by your teacher and will remain anonymous. Please, however, take the survey seriously because we are trying to find out some important information about environmental attitudes.

'Please be as honest as you can and answer every question to the best of your ability. It is important that everyone answers all the questions, so that we can get a proper picture of student attitudes.

'Thank you.'

Source: Fien et al. (2002: 173).

2.3 Responsibilities

In research, you play roles that are different from your usual roles in daily life. As a researcher, you have professional responsibilities, the first one of which is *competence.* If you do not have confidence in your skills for particular research, ask for advice, undertake further study, modify the project or even reconsider whether to proceed. Ask your superviser for advice if necessary—supervisers are more likely to be impressed by a willingness to seek advice than by avoidance of such issues.

Another responsibility is *respect* for people's culture, especially their moral and legal standards. If you are working in a culture that is different from your own, consider whether your research might be detrimental to the community. Try to become aware of and stand outside your own cultural biases. Try to see things from the point of participants, whether or not you agree personally with those viewpoints.

It is not uncommon to find people who are shy or embarrassed about talking with you. Occasionally, you will find people who are uncooperative or even angry. If this **[p. 19 ↓]** happens frequently, you should stop your research and try to work out what is wrong. If your work appears to be creating the problem, you should discuss the situation with

sympathetic informants, local leaders and your superviser if you cannot resolve the situation in the field.

Other responsibilities require that you:

- 1. Do not get emotionally or sexually involved with participants.
- 2. Do not break the law.
- 3. Never invent information (for example, filling out questionnaires without interviewing people).
- 4. Do not misrepresent yourself or your role.

Your responsibilities include anybody who works with you on your project. You must give them proper training in technical skills and ethics, and actively supervise their work. Box 2.2 has a training example from a large and well-funded series of surveys, but the same issues apply to you too.

Box 2.2 Training about Ethics in Fieldwork

Survey Training

In all, some 170 people were involved in 16 urban crime victimisation surveys in Papua New Guinea, many on more than one occasion, and some in multiple roles. The fieldwork was staffed by the Survey Director, Survey Managers, Field Supervisers, from 8 to 20 interviewers for each survey, and casual Field Assistants.

To ensure consistency (and therefore reliability of results), a five day training programme for supervisers and interviewers included three days of induction and interview practice, plus two pilot days in the field. The training programme particularly covered ethical issues such as interviewer competence and confidentiality. Interviewers had to become informed about the surveys so that they could answer questions from interviewees to ensure that informed consent occurred. They were also instructed about right of refusal to participate and privacy of interviewees.

The induction covered the survey background, the parties involved, the objectives of the surveys, key aspects of the methods, and fieldwork protocols. An introduction to the questionnaire was followed by extended interview practice using versions in two languages. Finally, administrative and contractual arrangements, field management and security requirements were discussed.

Two days in the field under close supervision ensured that fieldwork protocols were closely followed. All completed questionnaires were checked by the Survey Director and individual and group feedback provided.

Subsequently all completed interview schedules were checked by each interviewer's partner and by the Field Supervisors, who held daily debriefings with the interviewers.

Source: Adapted from Guthrie (2007a).

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2.4 Confidentiality

Remember that interviewees have the right to refuse interviews or to answer particular questions. Privacy entitles people to decide how much of their lives they will expose to you. As a researcher, you are obliged not to reveal information about participants in any way that might allow them to be identified.

- 1. Interview notes and completed questionnaires should not have the name of the interviewee written on them.
- 2. Only a code number should identify interviewees (in the crime surveys, we did not even identify individual respondents, but used only household IDs).
- 3. Notes and questionnaires should be kept locked up and not left lying around.

Never gossip about answers or respondents' personal information with fellow researchers or friends of family. Do not tell funny stories about the people you interviewed.

When you write up the report, you might well want to illustrate information about groups of people with some of their individual stories. These stories should be anonymous and written in such a way that readers could not identify the person. Box 11.5 later shows an example.

2.5 Feedback

Community feedback is very important, both from ethical and practical perspectives. People are curious to know about findings from research involving them. They have assisted you and you have a responsibility to inform them about the results. Feedback is also important if you want cooperation on follow-up visits.

In small-scale studies, feedback is not particularly difficult to set up, perhaps by holding information sessions with families or having small community meetings. That does not necessarily mean the meetings will be easy. Not everyone will be as excited by the results as you will be. Some people will deny the findings and blame you and your methods for misrepresenting what they think is the real situation (this occurred in two of the communities in the crime victimisation surveys where some residents disagreed with findings about high crime rates in their communities). Others will be offended because they think (perhaps wrongly) that they can identify themselves in your report and they do not like what your say. Sometimes, people might recognise privately that your findings are accurate but have vested interests in opposing them or action arising from them. The best that you can do in these situations is to accept, calmly and objectively, any valid criticisms, and explain why other criticisms might not be valid. Usually, **[p. 21 ↓]** discussion will lead to a balanced reaction to your report, with some community members starting to speak up in agreement with your findings.

Where you have undertaken a large survey, feedback is more difficult to arrange. A variety of approaches can be taken:

- 1. Put summaries of findings on community or work notice boards and give them to leaders for discussion in their own meetings.
- 2. Arrange public meetings through community leaders to talk about the findings, answer questions and participate in discussion.

SAGE knowledge

- 3. Deliver summaries to houses at sample sites.
- 4. Arrange interviews on local radio.
- 5. Write articles for newspaper columns.
- 6. Call meetings with interest groups and agencies to present the reports.
- 7. Hold workshops with key agency staff.

All these approaches were used in the community crime surveys with uneven success. In communities where literacy was low, public meetings were more effective than written reports. Articles in papers were more likely to be read by suburbanites than by squatters in settlements. Agency staff sometimes found difficulty understanding the relevance of findings to their own work. The lesson is to be flexible and adapt approaches to the particular situation.

2.6 Participatory Research

The various ethical standards outlined apply to all projects. For some researchers, however, they are not separate issues, but are manifestations of a scientific methodology that is itself the problem. In the positivist tradition, the researcher is an independent expert who studies a topic scientifically, analyses the results and perhaps makes recommendations to implementers. Some find major ethical problems with this. The key difficulty is that research 'subjects' often see no benefits from their contribution. Perhaps the researcher communicates only with the scientific community or high-level decision makers, or communicates poorly with the subjects, or the subjects do not understand the role of research or some combination of these difficulties.

In many minority communities and in many developing countries, this concern has resonance. Some people feel exploited by research, which they can think is a tool of their oppression, and they will cooperate only if they see a direct benefit. This is a valid position for many individuals and communities to take.

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One consequence is the proposition that researchers should stop thinking about subjects and should start thinking about participants. In this view, research should be

a process of reciprocal social action in which researchers and participants are on an equal footing in participatory research. Participatory research openly recognises that research is a political process, the researcher's own constructs or ways of thinking affect their behaviour, and that this behaviour is not an entitlement from independent scientific rules that override other considerations.

Participatory research requires full and active involvement by the participants in an educational process to empower the community. The intention is that participants gain benefits from the learning process in defining the research, collecting information, contributing their interpretations to the data analysis and knowing the results, and are therefore in a better position to carry outcomes forward. As the researcher, you are less of a leader and more of a fellow participant and technical resource. You might find the research going, quite legitimately, in different directions than anticipated. The effect is that participatory research becomes an approach to action research that has a particular ethical viewpoint. The most appropriate method is usually community case studies.

Flexibility and plenty of time are important for effective participatory research. Because too much time is required to do it properly in a short introductory research project, we will not deal with participatory research further here. If you go down this path, many books contain a wide range of special techniques.

2.7 Summary

Being social science researchers does not give us any special powers or entitlements. However, we do gain ethical responsibilities to act with integrity, especially towards participants in the research. Technical competence, too, is an ethical obligation.

Codes of Ethics

Ethics include professional competence, integrity and responsibility.

Permissions to Research

- 1. Find out your institution's rules for approving research.
- 2. Subsequent approvals might be needed from the research site.
- 3. The main ethical issue in data collection is informed consent from participants.

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Responsibilities

- 1. Researchers' professional responsibilities include competence and respect for people's culture, especially their moral and legal standards.
- 2. Do not get emotionally or sexually involved with participants, break the law, invent information or misrepresent yourself or your role.

Confidentiality

- 1. Privacy entitles people to decide how much of their lives they will expose to you.
- 2. Do not reveal information in any way that might identify participants.

Feedback

- 1. Community feedback is very important ethically and to ensure ongoing cooperation.
- 2. In small studies, feedback is not very difficult but it is more difficult in large surveys.

Participatory Research

For some researchers, the ethical problem is positivist research methodology, from which research 'subjects' often see little benefit. Their position is that research requires active involvement by the participants.

Ethics are not only a consideration when formulating your research project. The research project cycle is iterative. As you proceed, you will have to anticipate many issues and revisit previous ones. Ethics are no different. You need to consider upfront your role as a researcher and consider its ethical implications for you personally and for any others participating in the research. You also need to remain alert to ethical issues as you progress through the project and reflect continually on daily events. When in doubt, talk the issues through with others and seek advice, but often you will not find easy answers.

2.8 Annotated References

American Psychological Association. (2002). The Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct . Washington: APA.

An example of a Code of Ethics, available at <http://www.apa.org>.

American Sociological Association. (1999). Code of Ethics . New York: ASA. Another example of a Code of Ethics, available at <http://www.asa.org>.

McNamee, M. and D.Bridges. (2002). The Ethics of Educational Research . Oxford: Blackwell.

A comprehensive collection of articles on research ethics, relevant to many subject areas and types of research.

Scheyvens, R., ed. and D. Storey (eds). (2003). Development Fieldwork: A Practical Guide . London: Sage.

SAGE knowledge

Another comprehensive collection of material on doing fieldwork in developing countries. The book discusses participatory research and fieldwork ethics, including many examples from across Asia.

http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9788132105961.n2

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