

CHAPTER 4

The Ethics of Social Research

Why Is Ethical Practice Important?

Ethical discussions usually remain detached or marginalized from discussions of research projects. In fact, some researchers consider this aspect of research as an afterthought. Yet, the **moral integrity** of the researcher is a critically important aspect of ensuring that the research process and a researcher's findings are trustworthy and valid.

The term *ethics* derives from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning “character.” To engage with the ethical dimension of your research requires asking yourself several important questions:

- What moral principles guide your research?
- How do ethical issues influence your selection of a research problem?
- How do ethical issues affect how you conduct your research—the design of your study, your sampling procedure, and so on?
 - What responsibility do you have toward your research subjects? For example, do you have their informed consent to participate in your project?
 - What ethical issues/dilemmas might come into play in deciding what research findings you publish?
 - Will your research directly benefit those who participated in the study?

A consideration of ethics needs to be a critical part of the substructure of the research process from the inception of your problem to the interpretation and publishing of the research findings. Yet, this aspect of the research process does not often appear in the diagrams of the models of research we discussed in Chapter 3. A brief history of the ethical aspects of research will better help us understand why this still remains so.

A Short History of Ethics in Research

The history of the development of the field of ethics in research, unfortunately, has largely been built on egregious and disastrous breaches of humane ethical values. A journey through this history can provide valuable insights into the state of contemporary research ethics institutions and codes that currently guide social science and biomedical research.

The Tuskegee Syphilis Study

The Tuskegee syphilis study was conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) beginning in 1932. The study examined untreated cases of latent syphilis in human subjects to determine the “natural course” of the disease. Four hundred African American males from Tuskegee, Alabama, who already had syphilis, were recruited for this study, along with a matched sample of 200 noninfected males. The subjects were not asked to provide their informed consent to participate in this project. Those infected with syphilis in the early 1930s were given the standard treatment at that time, which consisted of administering “heavy metals.” However, when antibiotics became available in the 1940s and it was evident that this treatment would improve a person’s chances for recovery, antibiotic treatment was withheld from the infected subjects, even though the researchers knew that if left untreated, the disease would definitely progress to increased disability and eventually early death. According to some reports, “on several occasions, the USPHS actually sought to prevent treatment” (Heintzelman, 2001, p. 49). The experiment lasted more than four decades, and it was not until 1972, prompted by exposure from the national media, that government officials finally ended the experiment. By that time, “74 of the test subjects were still alive; at least 28, but perhaps more than 100 had died directly from advanced syphilis” (p. 49). There was a government investigation of the entire project launched in mid-1972, and a review panel “found the study ‘ethically unjustified’ and argued that penicillin should have been provided to the men” (p. 49).

At no time in the course of this project were subjects asked to give their consent to participate in the study. They were not specifically told about the particulars of what the study would entail. In fact, those who participated did not even volunteer for the project. Instead, they were deceived into thinking

they were getting free treatment from government doctors for a serious disease. It was never explained that the survey was designed to detect syphilis. . . . Subjects were never told they had syphilis, the course of the disease, or the treatment, which consisted of spinal taps. (Heintzelman, 2001, p. 51)

In his book *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment*, author James Jones (1993, as cited in Heintzelman, 2001) notes that the subjects in the Tuskegee experiment had a blind trust in the medical community. As one subject from the experiment notes, “We trusted them because of what we thought they could do for

us, for our physical condition. . . . We were just going along with the nurse. I thought [the doctors] was doing me good” (p. 50).

There is also a question of whether or not the researchers took advantage of a vulnerable population of individuals, whom they knew did not have the resources to afford medical treatment or the education to question their medical expertise. In addition, the researchers’ racist attitudes concerning black males made it easier for them to justify their decision not to provide them with treatment:

The rationale was that the conditions existed “naturally” and that the men would not have been treated anyway, according to the premise that shaped the study—that African Americans, being promiscuous and lustful, would not seek or continue treatment. (Brandt, as quoted in Heintzelman, p. 49)

Poor decisions on the part of the researchers, influenced by bigotry, allowed this to happen. But this kind of research is simply unacceptable. As a result of this case (as well as others), the notion of **informed consent**—participants’ right to be informed about the nature of a research study and its risks and benefits to them prior to consenting to participation—was born. This ethical principle in research is one of the cornerstones of modern social research ethics and will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter.

Further Developments in the History of Research Ethics

Formal consideration of the rights of research subjects grew out of the revelations of the terrible atrocities that were performed—in the guise of scientific research—on Jews and other racial/ethnic minority groups in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. One result of the revelations of these appalling medical experiments perpetrated on concentration camp prisoners *in the name of science* resulted in the creation of the **Nuremberg Code** (1949), a code of ethics that begins with the stipulation that all research participation must be voluntary. Other codes of ethics soon followed, including the Declaration of Helsinki (1964), which mandates that all biomedical research projects involving human subjects carefully assess the risks of participation against the benefits, respect the subject’s privacy, and minimize the costs of participation to the subject. The Council for International Organization of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) was also created for those researching in developing nations (Beyrer & Kass, 2002). Throughout the history of scientific research, ethical issues have captured the attention of scientists and the media alike. Although extreme cases of unethical behavior are the exception and not the rule in the scientific community, an accounting of these projects can provide important lessons for understanding what can happen when the ethical dimension of research is not considered holistically within the research process.

Thus far, we have been focusing on biomedical research. To what extent do the ethical issues in the natural sciences carry over into the behavioral and social sciences? There are some classic examples of extreme violations of ethics within

the annals of behavioral and social scientific research as well. Perhaps one of the most egregious comes from a 1963 research project concerning “obedience to authority,” conducted by psychologist Stanley Milgram. Milgram wanted to understand the conditions under which individuals obey authority figures. His research protocol called for deceiving volunteer subjects into thinking they were involved in an experiment on the impact of punishment on memory. Volunteers first read a series of word associations to individuals (who were confederates—secretly part of Milgram’s team) under a variety of experimental conditions: (1) they could not see or hear the confederate; (2) they could hear the confederate protest but not see the confederate; (3) they could hear and see the confederate; (4) same as three except the subject was required to place the confederate’s hand on a shock plate. If the confederates were unable to repeat the words back, volunteers were asked to administer what they thought was an “electric shock” (it was actually fake) to them, increasing the voltage for each wrong answer to see if shocking would in fact enhance learning. Subjects had a fake voltage meter in front of them with readings “from slight to severe shock,” with a sign posted next to the meter that warned about the danger of using this equipment. Some subjects protested, on hearing confederates complain about pain and other medical problems. Even though some volunteers wanted to quit the experiment, the researcher in charge insisted that they continue, saying the researcher would take the responsibility. Some subjects, however, did not protest and even went on to administer what they considered the highest and potentially lethal shock to a confederate, even when they had received no feedback that the person was even alive (Milgram, 1963).

Stanley Milgram’s experiment deceived his volunteer subjects and failed to obtain their informed consent. The protocol of this experiment did not allow subjects to quit even when some protested and asked that it be stopped. In addition, some subjects experienced psychological distress knowing they actually could administer what would be considered a lethal shock to another human being.

This experiment was partially replicated more than 40 years later by Jerry Burger (2009). Burger’s results differed little from Milgram’s original findings in that more than 70% of Burger’s respondents administered up to 150 volts to the confederate. Burger received the green light from his university’s ethics board by making some specific changes to Milgram’s original protocol that made sure that all his respondents were screened for psychological stress and that they would be debriefed right after the end of the experiment. He also limited the voltage reading maximum shock to 150 volts.

In spite of these protocol changes, one should ask whether or not this experiment was ethical. Respondents still needed to deal with the postexperimental reality that they were capable of administering a shock up to 150 volts to another human being. Does the end goal of this study justify the means?

Unfortunately, when the Tuskegee and Milgram experiments began, there were no review boards to oversee the goals of these projects. It was not until the mid-1960s that the U.S. federal government began the process of developing a set of

official rules governing the conduct of research, partly in response to such medical abuses as the Tuskegee experiment and others (see Beecher, 1966; Jones, 1981). This ultimately led to the passage of the National Research Act by the U.S. Congress in 1974. This act set up an Office for the Protection of Research Risks (OPRR) and ultimately resulted in a set of guidelines known as the **Common Rule**, which was widely adopted by federal agencies (Alvino, 2003, p. 898). The Common Rule mandated, among other things, that any institution receiving federal funds for research must establish an institutional review committee. These committees, known as **institutional review boards (IRBs)**, have the job of watching over all research proposals that involve working with human subjects and animals. Universities and colleges that receive federal funding for research on human subjects are required by federal law to have review boards or forfeit their federal funding. IRBs are responsible for carrying out U.S. government regulations proposed for human research. They must determine whether the benefits of a study outweigh its risks, whether consent procedures have been carefully carried out, and whether any group of individuals has been unfairly treated or left out of the potential positive outcomes of a given study (Beyrer & Kass, 2002). This is, of course, important in a hierarchically structured society where we cannot simply assume racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism are not present in research.¹

Currently, professional associations for each discipline, such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the American Sociological Association (ASA), and the American Psychological Association (APA), outline their own general ethical guidelines relevant to their disciplines, which elaborate and sometimes extend federal guidelines. Each of these associations has a specific Web site address that discusses a range of specific ethical concerns for each of these professions. The American Psychological Association's Web site (<http://www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.html>), for example, outlines specific ethical categories of conduct from "general principles" of professional conduct, which deal with issues such as integrity and justice, to more practice-specific concerns, such as privacy and confidentiality of patients and research subjects. There are also ethical guidelines on record keeping and fees, as well as on issues that may come up in a therapeutic situation, such as those especially pertaining to sexual intimacy with clients and therapy with former sexual partners. There are also guidelines for resolving ethical issues such as discrimination and handling of complaints.

How Are Research Subjects Protected Today?

Informed consent covers a range of procedures that must be implemented when your study includes human subjects. Human subjects in your study must be informed about the nature of your research project, and you must obtain their consent prior to their participation in your study. This information is usually contained in an informed consent letter that each respondent in your study needs to sign; by doing so, respondents indicate that they have read the letter and agree to participate in your research project.

The Informed Consent Letter

The informed consent letter does several things. It lets respondents know about your project and what role they will play in it. The letter should be detailed enough so that a participant is informed about the *specific nature of the project*, including any potential risks, and the letter should outline how participation will make a contribution to your project's goals. It is important for participants to weigh any potential risks with the benefits of their participating in your study. You should make sure that participants can follow up with any questions or concerns they may have about your project by providing them with information on whom to contact about the study.

You need to be sure that the study participants know that their agreement to participate is completely *voluntary* and that they are free to opt out of your study before, during, or after their initial participation. You need to be clear with them exactly how you will use the data you collect from them. You must also be sure to let them know the degree of confidentiality afforded to them once they participate. For example, you need to let them know how you will ensure the confidentiality of study participants' contribution; this should include information on what you intend to do with the results from your study. For example, will you publish the results of this study and, if so, where? Will you present these findings at conferences? How will you ensure that the data you collect from this study will remain confidential? You might let participants know the specific ways in which you will ensure their confidentiality. For example, you might inform them that their name will never appear on any data collected and that instead you might provide a unique identification number on their data and that this information will remain secure such that only the principal investigator of this study will have access to it. You might let them know how these data will remain secure throughout the duration of the project and how data that are no longer needed will be destroyed.

Informed consent is a question of basic human rights; it is intended to safeguard participants from any mental or physical harm that might befall them as a result of their participation. Participants are made aware of any potential risks that come with participation and know that procedures are set in place to deal with any negative outcomes that might ensue. In this regard, it is crucial that you build into your study the specific steps you will take to minimize any potential risks that may arise in the study (for example, by providing counseling hotline numbers if you think your study may create painful memories or even psychological trauma). Informed consent is also vital for the researcher in that it spells out the expectations on the part of researcher and participant, such as how long the study will take, whether or not the participant will receive compensation, and so on. The following is one example of a consent letter regarding a study where the participants are from a nonvulnerable population, meaning that they have reached adulthood, can fully assess the costs and benefits of participating in your study, and are freely able to give their consent to participate without feeling coerced. We have highlighted the different parts of this letter in *italics*, to give you an idea of what sections you will need to put into your own letter of consent.

STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECT

Informed Consent Letter

Title: Drinking Patterns and Attitudes Among College Seniors

Principal Investigator and Contact Information: Here you would place the name of your supervisor and his or her contact information if this is part of a student research project.

Student Researcher's Name: You would place your name, college, and class year here.

Purpose of Your Study:

Example: I am a senior sociology major at Boston College. This semester, I am conducting a research project as part of my sociology honors thesis. I am working closely with my supervisor, Dr. Sharlene Hesse-Biber, who will be the main contact person for this project. I would like to know if you would be willing to take part in a research study on drinking patterns of college seniors. The project is part of a larger nationwide study that seeks to gather data on the frequency and extent of alcohol use among graduating seniors, as well as to understand what you consider to be the factors within the college environment that serve to promote as well as to impede the drinking behaviors of college students in general.

Procedures:

You will be asked to complete an online survey questionnaire that will ask you about your drinking patterns and attitudes toward drinking in college. We are also interested in your opinions regarding the general drinking environment at your college.

Confidentiality:

All the information you provide will be strictly confidential, and your name will not appear on the questionnaire. Instead, your questionnaire will contain an identification number that is known only by the principal investigator of this study. This identification number is used to note that you have returned your questionnaire and will not be attached to the general survey itself. Once you complete the online survey, just click on the "exit" button on the last page of your survey, and your questionnaire will be automatically sent to us via e-mail, without any identification of the sender's e-mail address.

Note About Voluntary Nature of Participation and Statement About Compensation:

Your participation is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or may discontinue your participation at any time during the online survey. While we cannot compensate you for your time, your participation will be invaluable to our project as we seek an understanding of alcohol use on college campuses and the range of factors in the college environment that exacerbate drinking patterns of college students.

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Information About This Study:

You will have the opportunity to ask, and to have answered, all your questions about this research by e-mailing or calling the principal investigator, whose contact information is listed at the top of this letter. All inquiries are confidential.

Participant's Agreement Statement:

If you agree to participate in our study, we would appreciate your signing your name and date to this form and sending it back to us in the stamped and addressed envelope within one week of your receipt of this letter.

I have read the information provided above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. After it is signed, I understand I will receive a survey form via e-mail.

| | |
|------|------|
| Name | Date |
|------|------|

As soon as we receive your informed consent letter, we will e-mail you the online survey to fill out.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| _____ | _____ |
| Your name goes here | Your supervisor's name goes here |
| with your affiliation | with his or her affiliation |

Informed Consent: The Principle and the Reality

A major principle underlying many of the ethical policies that have historically developed around the issue of how to treat research subjects has been the use of informed consent, the right of subjects to decide—free of pressure or constraint and in a fully informed manner—whether or not they will be involved in any research endeavor (Faden & Beauchamp, 1986). Some ethicists question the extent to which informed consent has lived up to its promise (Cassileth, Zupkis, Sutton-Smith, & March, 1980). Some research has found that research subjects do not always understand the medical or social aspects of the clinical project in which they are participating, and some do not even know that they may in fact be participating in a research trial (Lynoe, Sandlund, Dahlqvist, & Jacobsson, 1991; see also Appelbaum, Roth, Lidz, Benson, & Winslade, 1987). As we have seen earlier in this chapter, in many instances, researchers fail to fully disclose to research subjects the

full extent of the risks and benefits of participating in a given study. This has led to some negative and even disastrous research outcomes for some of those who have participated in both social scientific and biomedical research.

In addition, it may be particularly difficult for a researcher using a qualitative approach to approximate full **disclosure** in an informed consent letter because qualitative research, by its very nature, is open to discovery; a change in research goals may be particularly difficult to anticipate. It may be nearly impossible for the qualitative researcher to account for all of the happenings in the research setting, and it may be hard to go back and forth to a Human Subjects Committee, such as an IRB, for approval each time one's project takes an unexpected turn. Adler and Adler (2002) argue that obtaining informed consent hits those researchers practicing participant observation the hardest:

Participant observation has a fuzziness about what is research and what is not, as ethnographers are observers of everyday life and may be generating insights and gathering data from people in all kinds of situations (a waitress at a restaurant, a fellow passenger on an airplane, a person whose child is the same age as one's own). They may not know in advance what information will drift their way and that may prove explicitly useful, either currently or in the future. (p. 40)

There is then a *principle* and a *reality* to providing informed consent. There exists a wide variation in how well researchers carry out the policy of informed consent in ongoing research projects. For example, in the following two informed consent letters to parents regarding a research project on body image, Letter A contains a much more detailed account of the research problem (including several research goals and an explanation of how the research will be carried out) than does Letter B.

LETTER A

Dear Parents:

My name is _____ and I am a sociologist and teacher at _____ College. I have previously conducted several studies on self-esteem in young girls. Currently, I am conducting a study on body image and self-esteem among African American and white preteen and adolescent girls. I firmly believe that it is essential to include a sample of African American girls. It has been my experience that the attitudes and beliefs of this important group have been all too often left out. They need a voice, and this is why I am writing to you today to ask for your help and permission to interview your daughter. I would also like to take a moment to tell you a little more about the study.

I plan on having the girls meet at the Health Center for pizza and soda after school in groups of three or four to chat about self-esteem and body image. If your daughter chooses to participate, with your permission, the interview will take no more than 45 minutes, and her participation will be completely voluntary.

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This research project will study preteen and adolescent attitudes about body image and self-esteem. These are some of the questions that we will explore:

1. From whom and where do preteens learn perceptions of body image and self-esteem? For example, what role do peers and the mass media play in influencing preteens' and adolescents' attitudes concerning their weight and body image?
2. What factors (if any) appear to "protect" preteen and adolescent girls against feelings of low self-esteem, and what factors (if any) contribute to a depressed sense of body esteem?

I envision this study as a unique opportunity. As I said earlier, we need to give young black women and the black community a stronger voice. I believe that my project can accomplish that. Yet even more important, I believe that providing an opportunity for the girls to get together to chat with friends and peers about issues of black identity and self-esteem will serve as a mechanism for black female empowerment.

Attached you will find a consent form which is to be, on agreement, signed by your daughter and yourself and brought to the Health Center the day of the interview. The interview is completely voluntary and confidential.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to call me at home: _____ or work: _____.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

_____ Ph.D.

Chair, Department of Sociology

Professor

Letter B is much shorter and provides few details concerning the research goals.

LETTER B

Dear Parents:

My name is _____ and I am a sociologist and teacher at _____ College. I am conducting a study on body image and self-esteem among African American and white preteen and adolescent girls.

I plan on having the girls meet at the Health Center for pizza and soda after school in groups of three or four to chat about self-esteem and body image. If your daughter

chooses to participate, with your permission, the interview will take no more than 45 minutes, and her participation will be completely voluntary and confidential.

Attached you will find a consent form which is to be, on agreement, signed by your daughter and yourself and brought to the Health Center the day of the interview.

I appreciate the opportunity to interview your daughter. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to call me at home: _____ or work: _____.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

_____ Ph.D.

Chair, Department of Sociology

Letter B contains the minimum information that can be given to respondents. Both letters ensure respondent **confidentiality**, that is, their names cannot be used in any written material or discussions concerning the research project, and interview materials will also be stored in a safe place free from disclosure. This means the researcher and others working on the project will not know the identity of the respondent (e.g., a respondent returns a survey questionnaire with no name on it).

These letters, however, point to some of the *political dimensions* involved in creating an informed consent letter. To the extent that they reveal the way they will conduct their research and are willing to share their research goals, researchers may be attempting to protect or not remain tied down to a particular research goal(s). For example, it may not always be in the interests of the researcher to be forthcoming regarding full disclosure. Some researchers may even go out of their way to develop a **cover story** to explain the research project, and this may be built into the original design of the research project:

The selection or invention of details to constitute the cover story and convince intended respondents is an element in the design of a research project. That requires skills of persuasion. Investigators develop a sense of what details allay fears and what prompt suspicions. As in other types of negotiation, such as bargaining over salaries, the initiating party uses a gambit declaring a position which it may concede and which supposes an opposition of interests between the negotiating parties. The investigator will reveal further information if required but in many cases subjects will not be briefed to ask pertinent questions and the project will move on quickly from negotiation to interview. (Homan, 1992, p. 324)

If respondents initially refuse to participate in a research project, rather than accepting the right of the researched to act autonomously, this is sometimes viewed as a failure on the part of the researcher, who may then try to break down “the

defenses of respondents” through a variety of means, from group pressure to exploitation of friendships. To this issue, Homan says:

In various ways research projects trade upon a relationship with agencies in power or authority. Sutherland was able to research the secretive and exclusive Rom community, which was normally hostile to representatives of the world outside it, by exploiting her role as teacher of its children. (Homan, 1992, p. 325)

There are even times when following the ethical guidelines of informed consent may actually not be in the best interests of your research respondents in certain respects. Baez (2002) points out the ethical conundrum he experienced in maintaining the confidentiality of his respondents. Baez interviewed 16 minority faculty members regarding their personal experiences with the tenure and promotion process at one private university. He notes that maintaining confidentiality can be a double-edged sword. Keeping the interviews confidential, especially for untenured faculty, allowed him to obtain candid data regarding racism and sexism within the university. On the other hand, confidentiality prevented him from reporting “serious contradictions within an institution that, through institutional documents and public comments by key administrators, purported to be supportive of racial and cultural diversity” (Baez, 2002, p. 39). For Baez personally, he stated, “I could not do so without feeling that I would be identifying my respondents to others in the institution,” although he may have wanted to call attention to the contradictory, even racist transgressions and patterns he uncovered in his research (p. 39). Bear in mind that you often do not know what your research will teach you, and it can be very difficult not to try to effect social change in some situations.

Patton (2002) notes that respondents are now challenging the right to “tell their stories” while at the same time not hiding their identities, especially when they see the project as an opportunity to gain empowerment through telling their stories and perhaps becoming a catalyst for social change (p. 411). Patton suggests a number of important ethical dilemmas that flow from this new viewpoint on confidentiality:

- Should the researcher “impose confidentiality against the wishes of those involved”?
- Are human subjects committees “patronizing and disempowering” if they turn down those respondents who wish to reveal their identities?
- Do research subjects make the choice independent of others in their social context? What about the privacy of significant others in their lives, such as children, spouse, and extended family members? (p. 411)

Beyond all of these considerations, some researchers are very cognizant of ethics in practice, attempt to use informed consent, and still experience challenges in observing the principles of informed consent in a consistent and carefully considered manner. Sarah Maddison is a feminist sociologist at the University of

New South Wales in Australia, where she focuses on gender and social policy. Maddison encountered several problems when trying to use informed consent in her ethnographic work with a feminist student group. Let's join Maddison behind the scenes.

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH SARAH MADDISON

A couple of years ago, I was engaged in a project researching a group of young student feminists drawn from various university campuses in New South Wales. The Cross Campus Women's Network (CCWN) was a loose coalition of women who met on a fortnightly basis. At each meeting, there would be between five and ten women and, with the exception of the convenor, these could often be a different group of women each fortnight. It was this changing roll call at each meeting that created a major obstacle for the ethical conduct of this research: Although I had carefully explained the purpose of my research and sought permission to attend and participate the first time I went along, there were women at subsequent meetings who missed out on my spiel and became very suspicious of my presence and my intentions.

So they kicked me out! The convenor e-mailed me and asked me not to attend any more meetings until they had resolved this issue between themselves (apparently there were differing views about the merits of my research within the group). I was allowed to send an e-mail to the group explaining myself again and then I just had to sit and wait. Time to reflect on power (shared), clarity (and confusion), and consent (given—and taken away again).

I have to say I felt pretty foolish—but in actual fact it was my fear of *appearing* foolish that had put me in this situation to begin with. As a researcher wanting to begin the "participant" part of the participant observation process, I was reluctant to continually draw attention to my researcher status by outlining my project every time I saw a new face. I really wanted to blend into the group and participate in meetings as if I was "one of them," not an outsider. More than anything I wanted them to forget what I was doing there so that I could somehow observe, participate, and consume what "really" went on in their meetings. I rushed in there with the arrogant assumption that the merits and importance of my research were obvious to all and the belief that no one would *not* want to participate.

So stupid—and so wrong. They were right to kick me out because I was behaving very badly, and totally unethically. I had forgotten for a moment that the presence of a researcher always and inevitably changes the dynamics and practices of a group and that my very presence made the group a *different* group to the one that had existed before I strutted through the door. More important, I had deluded myself that, as a participant observer, I could somehow, sometimes take off my researcher hat and be "one of them." Of course I knew all these things before I began, but in my enthusiasm to get the project started, I had left my ethical practice at the door as I barged on through.

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My delusions of invisibility made me forget the first and most golden rule of any sort of research—*consent*. How could my research have any integrity if even one member of the group did not realize I was a researcher? How dishonest of me! How misleading! I could really only be grateful that these young women were feisty and confident enough to boot me out while they considered their choice to participate in the project. There would be many other groups of potential research subjects who would not have the confidence to ask a researcher to leave their group. This awareness made me reflect anew on the significance of power in research relationships and the role that consent must play in clarifying these power relationships.

After a few weeks I was informed that they had decided to let me come back, and I returned gratefully and with my tail between my legs. I had learnt my lesson. Even though I had thought I had been completely open and transparent about my project, I had been careless about ensuring that every member of the group had a good understanding of who I was, why I was there, and what the research might achieve—an essential step for ethical research in which informed consent is crucial to the legitimacy of the entire project. This is not a lesson I will forget in a hurry, and I am thankful for these young women's patience in helping me learn it again.

There is a great deal we can learn from this example. Specifically, Maddison shows how ethical practice is an ongoing consideration. Moreover, ethical issues and informed consent provide researchers with an opportunity to learn about themselves and to develop as researchers—ethics are a doorway to reflexivity.

Beyond Informed Consent: What Are the Ethical Dilemmas in Social Research?

Although the principles of informed consent may be relatively clear, the actual practice of ethics in a given research setting can be complex and may pose a myriad of fundamental ethical questions that a researcher must navigate, often without clear guidance from a given set of ethical codes. A discussion of some of the kinds of ethical issues that may arise in qualitative social science research may serve as a guide to thinking about these issues.

The Ethical Predicament of Deception in Research

Some researchers argue that their research must be conducted in a covert manner to obtain the information they need to understand certain social phenomena. For example, some researchers have gone undercover to study underground cultures such as drug cultures (see Williams, 1996) and used **deception** to find out

about the inner workings of the social life of drug dealers and drug takers, often observing individuals engaging in illegal activities and sometimes finding themselves asked to engage in these same activities. There would be no point in asking for the informed consent of the members of this closed society because they would most likely not want their organization studied. Williams (1996) conducted participant observation on a subculture of cocaine users and dealers in the after-hours clubs in an inner city and noted the following concerning his undercover activities:

I was in a Brooklyn club where I was already conspicuous as a nonuser of cocaine. It seems that I was also overzealous. In the sense that I was staring too much and asking too many questions. One of the club's owners came over to me and said "Listen, my man, if you're undercover, I got people that'll take care of that." I was not sure whether he meant force or bribery, but in any case I stopped going to that club. . . . As a researcher, I knew what data I needed: information on cocaine users and the associated nightlife, street myths about use. . . . But as most researchers know there is a quid pro quo in every research situation. . . . I was asked to do a variety of favors, such as lending money and finding social workers. . . . On many occasions I was asked to engage in illegal acts. . . . This and similar requests put me in an awkward position. (pp. 30–31)

Any student reading this example might want to ask the following question:

- Is it ethical to go undercover to study this organization?

One can imagine those social scientists studying deviant behaviors such as life in the underground drug trafficking world and wonder how difficult it might be to obtain the informed consent of everyone involved in order to study the inner workings of an illicit drug trade. The following questions are raised:

- What does the researcher do when he or she confronts information or situations where individuals are observed engaging in major violations of the law?
- Is the researcher ethically obligated to report such activity?
- What about the risks the researcher is taking in terms of his or her own life in doing so?

Deception in research doesn't have to occur by going undercover in carrying out research projects. The Milgram experiment was a study in deception. From the start, Milgram did not truthfully explain the nature of the experiment, and he deceived subjects into thinking they were in fact applying electrical shocks to another human being. Some qualitative social science research methods, like fieldwork, can also require a more subtle type of deception between the researcher and the researched, even when fieldworkers disclose the fact that they are conducting research and its nature to those they are studying. Sociologist Herbert Gans

(1982), conducting fieldwork in Park Forest, a suburb near Chicago; in Boston's West End; and in Levittown, a New Jersey suburb, gives his personal reflections on the anxiety he experienced in what he finds is "the deception inherent in participant observation":

Once the fieldworker has gained entry, people tend to forget he is there and let down their guard, but he does not; however much he seems to participate, he is really there to observe and even to watch what happens when people let down their guard. He is involved in personal situations in which he is, emotionally speaking, always taking and never giving, for he is there to learn and, thus, to take from the people he studies, whereas they are always giving information, and are rarely being given anything. Of course they derive some satisfaction from being studied, but when they ask the participant observer to give—for example, help or advice—he must usually refuse in order to maintain his neutrality. Moreover, even though he seems to give of himself when he participates, he is not really doing so and, thus, deceives the people he studies. He pretends to participate emotionally when he does not; he observes even when he does not appear to be doing so and like the formal interviewer, he asks questions with covert purposes of which his respondents are likely to be unaware. In short, psychologically, the participant observer is acting dishonestly; he is deceiving people about his feelings and in observing when they do not know it, he *is* spying on them. (p. 59)

Gans represents a particular point of view on the role of the researcher as participant in the fieldwork experience. The idea that researchers should remain neutral and "detached" from the research subject tells us that they aspire to the goal of objectivity in the research process. This objectivity then is enhanced by deception. Yet, as we have seen, this frame on the research process is one of many *paradigms* one can bring to the fieldwork experience. There are those who believe researchers do not need to maintain distance between themselves and the researched. Ann Oakley (1981) critiques this model of neutrality and instead argues for bridging this divide through empathy and affinity. Other ethnographers feel that this form of closeness between researcher and researched also has its problems and that one can become too close to respondents, which in turn can create a series of conflicts and deceptions as well. Ethnographer Judith Stacey (1991) comments:

The irony I now perceive is that ethnographic method exposes subjects to far greater danger and exploitation than do more positivist, abstract, and "masculinist" research methods. And the greater the intimacy—the greater the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship—the greater is the danger. (p. 114)

Stacey (1991) notes that the more involved she became with her respondents, the further exposed she became to situations within the field that left her open to the

possibility of manipulating and betraying her respondents (p. 113). Thus, personal engagement with research subjects on an interpersonal level can lead to unanticipated and unintended deception that can actually raise even more the possibility of undue power, influence, and authority in the research process. So we can see that issues of disclosure and trust are actually very complex.

Some might argue that a certain amount of strategic deception is needed when researchers are especially interested in “studying up” (see Korn, 1997). The study of elites is not a common practice within the social sciences (for an exception, see Hertz & Imber, 1995). The elite and semi-elite populations hold key positions within society, yet their activities and power remain invisible to the average citizen. Elites often protect their privacy through a myriad of self-imposed barriers, ranging from unlisted phones and e-mail accounts to the hiring of staff to screen their calls and contacts and security personnel to prevent unwanted contact with those outside their elite culture. Adler and Adler (2002) note that current IRB and professional associations, which fear lawsuits, have developed codes of ethics that now ban all aspects of covert research, using the argument that it is almost impossible to obtain informed consent. In addition, these boards cannot protect researchers from revealing the identity of their respondents if they are asked to do so by officials investigating their research findings.

Adler and Adler (2002) argue that ethics boards have overstepped their function, resulting in the unanticipated outcome of favoring the dominant classes over the weaker, saying that “powerful, elite groups can now better hide their mechanisms of control, while weak and powerless groups have lost the ability to tell their stories from their own perspective” (p. 40). These researchers lament the fact that the banning of covert research such as that done by Erving Goffman in his classic work *Asylums* (1961), providing a bird’s-eye view of the treatment of the mentally ill by those who care for them, or research on the activities of control agencies such as the police as carried out by Gary Marx (1988), will no longer be possible under the new ethics guidelines.

Haggerty (2004) has identified what he terms an “ethics creep”—an expansion and intensification of ethical rules and regulations—that has taken over social science research “in the name of ethics” and in his perception has resulted in an overregulation of the field (p. 391). The issue of ethics creep has found its way into the research in which students engage. If you are a student researcher who plans to publish your research paper or present your research findings at a conference, then it is imperative that your research project be formally approved by your college or university’s IRB. Very often, students who conduct research for “educational purposes only” are not required to obtain “official” IRB approval. Their supervisor’s ethics oversight is usually sufficient to warrant their carrying out their research project.

If you decide to go forward with IRB approval, you may find that even when your student project is considered to be a very low risk to your research participants (in that it does not contain any deception, it does not work with a vulnerable population, and the level of invasiveness of respondents’ privacy is low), your project’s approval by the IRB may run into trouble. The following are some of the ethical

dilemmas facing many low-risk research projects that become sidetracked at the ethics approval stage.

Divided Loyalties: An Ethical Researcher Dilemma

Bell and Nutt (2002) talk about their “divided loyalties” in terms of how their professional and occupational commitments pull them in many different directions, creating ethical dilemmas arising from the multiple roles they bring to a research setting. Bell and Nutt provide an example of how Linda Nutt’s professional role as a social work practitioner, who is “bound by general social work codes of practice” (p. 79), conflicted with her role as researcher:

As she was leaving the home of a new carer following the research interview Linda Nutt noticed an unambiguously sexually explicit picture in the hallway. For most researchers this would not be an issue; art is a matter of personal taste. But Linda Nutt wasn’t just a researcher; she was also a practitioner. Frequently when children are placed in foster homes little is known about their life experiences so new carers are instructed to assume that all children have been sexually abused unless specifically told otherwise. . . . There is a statutory responsibility to disregard confidentiality where children are at risk. Nonetheless, because she wanted to keep the roles clear and separate—to act as a researcher (and be in receipt of information) and not as an employee . . . (who could give them information), Linda Nutt chose not to tackle this issue with these new carers but spent several days considering this ethical dilemma. In the end the social worker practitioner identity overcame that of the researcher identity and Linda Nutt informed the local authority of her unease regarding the picture and its potential impact upon the foster children. (Bell & Nutt, 2002, pp. 79–80)

Some researchers employ research techniques that raise ethical issues regarding how human subjects are treated. Homan (1992) describes what he calls the “softening up” techniques to get at more personal information from respondents who may be unwilling to talk:

The insidiousness of softening-up techniques is demonstrated by some impertinent questions reserved for the latter and more compliant stages of the interviews and questionnaires: having scrupulously sought and obtained a general consent from respondents and their parents. (p. 328)

By its very nature, qualitative research often requires emotional engagement with those with whom we build knowledge. Jean Duncombe and Julie Jessop (2002) discuss how some researchers can lack sympathy for their respondents and “fake” their interest and concern for those they research. Duncombe describes how she wound up treating some of her respondents in a research project she was conducting on youth training schemes:

We found it more difficult to achieve rapport where we did not spontaneously feel empathy with our interviewees. For example in an early study of Youth Training Schemes (YTS), Jean felt she established a “genuine,” if shallow rapport with the YTS trainees and with the more conscientious employers who took training seriously, because she was “on their side.” But with the more exploitative employers and trainers (who provided neither jobs nor training), she knew she was faking rapport to “betray” them into revealing their double standards, and sometimes whilst smiling at them she almost smiled to herself, thinking: “What a revealing quote”. . . . Julie felt uncomfortable and personally compromised when she found that, in order to obtain a “good” interview, it seemed necessary to smile, nod and appear to collude with views she strongly opposed. (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002, p. 115)

Researchers are human just like everyone else. Accordingly, we all bring our own likes, dislikes, emotions, values, and motivations to our research projects. It is unrealistic to expect that you will always like those you research or that you will always naturally feel 100% engaged. This being said, bear in mind that it is you, the researcher, who has initiated this process and involved others (your subjects). Consider this carefully as you contemplate your ethical obligations to your research participants, but as you think through these issues, do so with your own “humaneness” in mind—be realistic and fair to all involved.

How Can I Observe Ethical Values in My Research Practice?

Ethics exist within a social context. The ethical dilemmas we discussed in this chapter serve to remind us of the importance of including an ethical perspective in the very foundation of our research project. Ethical rules cannot possibly account for all events that may arise in a given project. Rubin and Rubin (1995) note that ethical guidelines do not begin to cover all of the ethical dilemmas you may face in the practice of social research:

You cannot achieve ethical research by following a set of preestablished procedures that will always be correct. Yet, the requirement to behave ethically is just as strong in qualitative interviewing as in other types of research on humans—maybe even stronger. You must build ethical routines into your work. You should carefully study codes of ethics and cases of unethical behavior to sensitize yourself to situations in which ethical commitments become particularly salient. Throughout your research, keep thinking and judging what are your ethical obligations. (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 96, as quoted in Patton, 2002, p. 411)

A useful distinction we might keep in mind here is the difference between what Homan (1992) terms *ethical codes* and *ethical values*. By agreeing to comply with **ethical codes**, as outlined in an informed consent proposal, a researcher is not

absolved from adhering to the underlying ethical values contained in these codes, yet very often “they invite observance in the letter rather than in the principle” (Homan, 1992, p. 325). Homan reminds us that the danger is that many researchers think their moral obligation begins and ends with the signing of the letter of consent. In some cases, an informed consent letter is seen as protecting the researcher more than the researched. One anthropologist notes:

I fear that informed consent, when mechanically applied using a form or some verbal formula, becomes more of a protection for the researcher than the researched. Informed consent obtained in this way is unilateral rather than bilateral and protects the researcher against charges from participants that they did not understand fully the intent or outcome of the research. (Fluehr-Lobban, 1998, p. 199)

Ethics does not exist in a vacuum. As King, Henderson, and Stein (1999) note,

The ethics of human subjects research may be universal but is at the same time deeply particularized, so that what autonomy or informed consent or confidentiality or even benefit and harm *means* depends on the circumstances. The circumstances do not determine whether any of these “Western” moral concepts applies, but *how*. (p. 213)

Key Ethical Issues Generated by Student Research and Strategies for Overcoming Them

Novice student researchers who conduct qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods research projects often encounter a particular set of ethical issues. This section deals with some common ethical issues student researchers often confront and how these might be addressed by both the students and their faculty research supervisors.

The following table is an adaptation of a range of ethical issues student researchers may confront as they begin their research project, as well as some strategies for overcoming these ethical dilemmas. We suggest a range of ways faculty supervisors of student research can facilitate ethical decision making for their student researchers. Table 4.1 is adapted from the work of Gough, Lawton, Madill, and Stratton (2003).

We can note from this table that an important strategy for student researchers who want to conduct a qualitative project is for them to launch a short pilot study. A student who plans, for example, to interview college seniors regarding their drinking experiences in college might begin with just one interview. This will allow both students and supervisors to assess the student’s skill and comfort level in conducting an interview, and it also provides an opportunity for the researcher and supervisor to talk about any specific issues or concerns that might have come up during and after the pilot interview. To make the most use of the pilot interview, it might be good for students to write a short memo on their interview experience and to record their reflections on how the interview went from their point of view as well as that of their participant. These *reflective memos* might also be written at several points along the data collection stage of the project. Student researchers

Table 4.1 Some Potential Ethical Decision-Making Issues and Dilemmas Confronting Student Researchers

| Ethical Issues Student Researchers Confront | Student Strategy for Empowering Ethical Decision Making | Ethical Issues Faculty Supervisors Confront | Faculty Strategy for Empowering Ethical Student Decision Making |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Students begin a research project as a means of exploring or solving topics they are personally concerned about or involved in; use of research as a “therapeutic action” could influence the outcome of the research, as well as the involvement of the students and research participants. | Students might first attempt a small pilot study to judge how they will react to a larger research project. | Faculty advisers need to gauge the students’ level of engagement or attachment to the topics and locate possible problem issues. | Faculty advisers should have an extended conversation with students prior to the beginning of the research project and check up with them throughout the project’s duration. Faculty advisers should be able to advise students if the project does not appear to be working. |
| Students approach sample collection and interviewing without a good background of safety precautions in research. | Students must remain aware of personal safety in research (i.e., be careful about what research subjects they choose and where they are interviewed). | Faculty advisers need to provide students with an overview of safety practices. | Faculty advisers and students should discuss safety in supervisory meetings. Faculty advisers should encourage students to check in before and after they go out on an interview assignment. |
| Students seek to use family and friends for research purposes and run into issues of confidentiality. | Students should consider whether they will be able to honor ethical rules governing confidentiality. Students should gauge their own level of ability to conduct private research. | Faculty advisers need to inform students of confidentiality and privacy guidelines. | Faculty advisers and students need to have a meeting about ethical guidelines (both university and IRB guidelines). Faculty advisers should advise students if they think the students will be unable to follow through with these ethical guidelines. |

Source: Adapted from Gough et al., 2003, p. 10.

should be encouraged to meet with their supervisors as their project proceeds and share their reflective memos with their supervisors in a nonevaluative atmosphere. The spirit of these meetings should be more of a dialogue of sharing and support for the student researcher. Having students reflect on their project and feel that they have the support of a supervisor/mentor might go a long way to head off any potential ethical issues that might arise, and it will also strengthen the research support for novice students by providing them with an access point for asking questions and expressing their concerns without an evaluative component.

How Do New Technologies in Social Research Impact the Practice of Ethical Research?

Sometimes you may want to use data that appear in the public domain for purposes other than such data were intended. For example, suppose that you seek to understand how users of an Internet community such as Facebook present themselves to their friends. You may begin by content-analyzing their online profile, looking for the type and range of information they provide about themselves, what they have listed as their interests or their taste in music, Facebook groups they have joined, the types of pictures they have posted, and so on.

After looking at this data, you as the social researcher decide to then use all the information you have collected from a range of Facebook users to create a series of profiles of those people you intend to contact later, based on the information you glean from this public Web site. In essence, you are using some type of “profiling,” which may be based on one’s gender and race. Suppose, in fact, you go on to categorize Facebook users and begin to make generalizations about their gender and race that appear to reproduce traditional gender and racial stereotypes.

Let’s look at some of the possible ethical issues that relate to the collection of your data and the beginnings of your categorical analysis. Did users give you permission to take personal information they posted concerning their personal profile for research purposes? Does the fact that this information is public and accessible make your use of these data acceptable? Is contacting users for a future research study without their consent ethical?

We can take this example a step further. Say you are conducting research on drinking patterns among college freshmen, and you are using Facebook profiles and pictures to gather data and to identify a sample of college freshmen—those who binge-drink and those who don’t drink. You may look through photos of individuals and place them in categories (consumption vs. nonconsumption) based on the presence of alcohol in five or more of their pictures. Can you use this data for a valid study? How do you ensure its accuracy (for example, what if the subject is a nonconsumer yet has alcohol present in pictures)? Is this a privacy violation (if the subjects are underage)? All this leads to our big question: How does a researcher conduct ethical research, and how does a researcher distinguish between public (i.e., usable) information and private information?

As this example illustrates, one growing ethical concern for researchers lies in the realm of Internet technology: fielding respondents and samples from sites,

especially social networking sites. Doing so can raise issues of privacy and informed consent. Almost anyone can access information (in the form of user profiles, for example) from social networking Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook. This is tempting study ground for qualitative researchers in particular, argue Eysenbach and Till (2001), because

qualitative research seeks “to acknowledge the existence of and study the interplay of multiple views and voices—including, importantly, lay voices.” Internet postings are accessible for qualitative research of these voices—for example, to determine information needs and preferences of consumers. (p. 1103)

Researchers could use this information presented on the Internet and social network communities, arguing that because it is presented in a public domain, they need not seek consent to use the information as presented, nor seek consent to contact the individual in question for further questions or inclusion in a research project (Moreno, Fost, & Christakis, 2008, p. 157). This raises the following questions, among others:

- To what extent can one verify the validity or accuracy of information on these sites?
- Should the researcher inform the individuals of their inclusion in research?
- Is it acceptable to use social networking sites as a way of recruiting participants?
- How does one establish a definition of informed consent in working with this information?

In such circumstances, traditional social research practices are harder to honor. As Charles Kadushin (2005) explains, “In standard practice social science research, anonymity and confidentiality are both routinely granted to respondents, informants, and subjects in experiments and observations” (p. 140). However, researchers need to consider whether they are mining social network databases for large-scale samples or using individuals as their main source of data or for elucidation of findings. This, in part, determines how researchers approach their Internet subjects. As Eysenbach and Till (2001) note, “On the Internet the dichotomy of private and public sometimes may not be appropriate, and communities may lie in between” (p. 1104). The subject(s) may not be aware of disseminating public information, and the ideas of privacy and informed consent are often in flux.

One example of ethical implications in research based on or using social networking Web sites is that adolescents or teenagers using a site such as MySpace may misrepresent their demographic information, especially age. Although Moreno et al. (2008) acknowledge that,

[for] researchers who are interested in studying . . . teens, social networking Web sites present a new universe both because of the sheer volume of adolescents who use them and because it is possible, at least in theory, to learn a great deal about teens by what they choose to display publicly. (p. 157)

They warn that there is a possibility that the Web profile may be fabricated (p. 159). If one is choosing to recruit a sample from this information, this misrepresentation of information may skew the sample entirely.

If the researcher chooses to use information presented publicly on MySpace, as in the example, Moreno et al. (2008) warn that “although [demographic] information is public, researchers should still use the same standards of protecting confidentiality as they do for any other research study” (p. 158). Simply because the research is done virtually, “it does not follow that it is acceptable for subjects to be recruited as research subjects without meaningful consent from the subject and/or an appropriate surrogate, such as a parent” (p. 159).

In addition to issues of confidentiality and consent, there is concern as to how the presence of a researcher affects the dynamic of the community under observation. According to Eysenbach and Till (2001), “there is increasing evidence that researchers posting or ‘lurking’ on [certain] communities may be perceived as intruders and may damage the communities,” especially in regard to online communities (p. 1103). For example, let’s imagine a community Web site that deals with individuals discussing their experiences with child abuse. On this site, the community members can find healing and solace through the shared experiences of the members. If a researcher openly announces his or her presence to the group, the group’s ability to share with one another (and the researcher, if at all) may be compromised. As Eysenbach and Till (2001) show,

There is also a considerable danger that announcing the research may influence future communication patterns or provoke many members to opt out (which may damage the community). (p. 1105)

Overcoming Ethical Dilemmas of Social Software Technologies

The following list of ethics questions comes from Dag Elgesem (2002) and is a good starting point for considering ethics in online and social network community research.

- Is there only minimal risk of harm?
- Are the integrity and the autonomy for research subjects adequately secured?
- Is the method adequate?
- Is the knowledge produced relevant enough?

Conclusion

Integrating ethics into the entire research process, from selecting the research problem to carrying out research goals and interpretation and reporting research findings, is critical to ensuring that the research process is guided by ethical principles beyond informed consent. This chapter challenges us as researchers to become

aware of the range of ethical dilemmas we confront in carrying out the day-to-day tasks of any given research project. An important step beyond securing informed consent lies in the researcher engaging in self-reflexivity by asking,

- What is your ethical standpoint on the research process?

You may find the following checklist of questions useful in uncovering your own ethical perspective on the research process:

- What type of ethical principles guide your work and life, beyond the professional code of ethics you are bound by through a given discipline or professional association?
- Where do your ethical obligations to the researched start and end?

Knowing your own ethical standpoint as a researcher is an important internal guide as to how you proceed in your research. Michael Patton (2002) provides an ethics checklist to take into account as you proceed with your own research project (pp. 409–410). In Table 4.2, we have adapted Patton's list to include a range of research inquiries.

Table 4.2 Patton's Checklist of Questions for Conducting an Ethical Research Project

- How will you explain the purpose of the inquiry and methods to be used in ways that are accurate and understandable to those you are researching?
- Why should the researched participate in your project?
- In what ways, if any, will conducting this research put people at risk? (psychological, legal, political, becoming ostracized by others?)
- What are reasonable promises of confidentiality that can be fully honored?
- What kind of informed consent, if any, is necessary for mutual protection?
- Who will have access to the data? For what purposes?
- How will you and your respondent/s likely be affected by conducting this research?
- Who will be the researcher's confidant and counselor on matters of ethics during a study?
- How hard will you push for data?
- What ethical framework and philosophy informs your work and ensures respect and sensitivity for those you study, beyond whatever may be required by law?

Source: Adapted from Patton, 2002, p. 408.

A good example of ethical reflection within the research process comes from a study conducted by Huber and Clandinin (2002). They interviewed inner-city elementary school children and related the ethical “give-and-take” they engaged in to the process of understanding the lives of inner-city youth. They cite the importance of creating an “ethic of relational narrative inquiry” that goes beyond the requirements of signing a consent form:

From a nonrelational research ethics perspective, we had met the ethical requirements, but this was not sufficient. . . . When we felt disease around who we were as researchers in relation with Azim [a respondent in the researchers’ study] we realized we needed a different way of understanding what it means to live out ethical research with children as coresearchers in relational narrative inquiry. (Huber & Clandinin, 2002, p. 794)

They found that a relational model of inquiry and ethics—a view of research and ethics as embedded in the context of interpersonal relationships—requires a great deal of reflexivity on the part of the researcher (especially when studying a vulnerable population). Putting their reflexive experience into the research process enabled them to engage in a dialogue with their own ethical standpoint and ultimately to confront their own personal biases as researchers as well as teachers of elementary school children. In the end, they became more attentive to the complexities of co-creating meaning and the necessity to live within the tensions they experienced as co-researchers:

As we entered into coresearcher relationships with children, we began to be very thoughtful about what plotlines were shaping us as teacher researchers, as researcher teachers, as researchers. Attending to the maintenance of relationships with children, now and in the future, became, for us, a first consideration. . . . We realized that our attentiveness to relationship could conflict with dominant stories of what “good” teachers and “good” researchers do. Plotlines for good researchers do not often attend to the aftermath for children’s lives as their first concern. As relational narrative inquirers engaged with children as researchers, we realized that it was here that we needed to attend. (Huber & Clandinin, 2002, p. 800)

It is our hope that this chapter provides you with an awareness of the importance of the ethical dimension in the research process. We have also tried to offer some of the tools you’ll need to enhance your awareness of your own ethical standpoint and its application in your ongoing research endeavors. The various components of ethical practice continue to come up throughout the following chapters, including a discussion of emergent ethical concerns linked to computer-driven research.

Glossary

Common Rule: Set up by the Office for the Protection of Research Risks, this rule was established to protect potential participants in research studies from exploitation. Most specifically, it mandated that a review board of proposals be set up for every institution that receives research funds, thereby benefiting the participants and maintaining the ethical boundaries of research studies.

Confidentiality: This means that research subjects are protected by remaining unidentifiable. That is, their names may not be used in any written material concerning the research or in discussions of the research project, and all interview materials are stored in a safe place that no one save the researchers can access.

Cover story: Researchers who choose to use deception may even go out of their way to develop a “cover story” to explain the research project (this may be built into the original design of the research project).

Deception: Researchers may be dishonest about who they are or what they are doing and thus use deception to conduct their research. Sometimes, deception may be more subtle and unintentional on the researcher’s part.

Disclosure: A researcher may or may not reveal, or disclose, his or her identity and research purpose. In accordance with ethical considerations, we advocate full disclosure whenever possible.

Ethical codes: These are codes of conduct set in place to protect the research subjects and their setting—neither of which should be harmed by the research process. Professional associations have specific codes of ethics that spell out a set of rules governing research and based on moral principles.

Informed consent: Informed consent is a critical component in ethical research that uses human participants. Informed consent aims to ensure that the subject’s participation is fully voluntary and informed, based on an understanding of what the study is about, what its risks and benefits are, how the results will be used, and the fact that participation is voluntary and can be stopped at any time and that identity will be protected.

Institutional review boards (IRBs): Institutional review boards (IRBs) ensure that studies using living subjects are ethical and will not cause harm.

Moral integrity: The moral integrity of the researcher is a critically important aspect of ensuring that the research process and the researcher’s findings are trustworthy and valid.

Nuremberg Code: A code of ethics established after World War II that begins with the stipulation that all research participation must be voluntary.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the ethical substructure of the research process, and why must ethics be attended to holistically?
2. Although informed consent is a critical component to ensure the ethical dimension of your research project, there are instances in which there is a failure to fully disclose to research subjects the

full extent of the risks and benefits of participating in a given study. Therefore, who do you believe is responsible for any unintended consequences?

3. The questions brought up in this chapter include the following: Where do your ethical obligations to the researched start and end? What responsibility does the researcher have to the participant after the research process has ended? Does the researcher still have a responsibility for any emotional or psychological problems that ensue in part due to the research project? What do you think about these issues?

4. Institutional review boards were created to oversee the research process and maintain that “no one group of individuals has been unfairly treated or left out of the potential positive outcomes of a given study.” However, as discussed, IRBs have proved ineffective in certain cases where members of the boards have a vested interest in the very studies they oversee. Therefore, do you believe IRBs to be an effective resource in ensuring ethical centrality in research processes? If not, what is your suggestion for improving the assurance of the ethical dimension of the research process? What would be, in your mind, the most effective means of ensuring ethical considerations and safety in research projects conducted in universities?

5. As noted in this chapter, informed consent does not absolve researchers from all ethical lapses. Why is this? What are some ethical considerations one must keep in mind when conducting covert research or participant observation? What are some other ways of making sure that the ethical dimension is given its proper place within your research project?

6. Do you believe it is the responsibility of the researcher to reveal information concerning the research participant if he or she feels it benefits the subject? Why or why not?

7. If a researcher imposes confidentiality within the research process, do you see this as a way of disempowering research participants who want to reveal their identities? Do you believe it is the sole responsibility of the researcher to determine whether information should be kept confidential or not? Should the issue of confidentiality be a collaborative effort? To what extent should it be collaborative?

8. If a sociologist is interested in studying underage teenagers’ drinking and driving behaviors, what are some of the ethical considerations the researcher would have to keep in mind? Discuss some of the ethical dilemmas you would encounter. How would you structure your research project (bearing in mind the centrality of ethics in structuring your research process)?

Resources

Suggested Web Sites

National Science Foundation

<http://www.nsf.gov/bfa/dias/policy/docs/45cfr690.pdf>

This link is to the current law regarding informed consent/internal review boards/human subjects: “The Common Rule for the Protection of Human Subjects for Behavioral and Social Science Research.”

<http://www.nsf.gov/bfa/dias/policy/hsfaqs.jsp>

This is a list of frequently asked questions concerning the above legislation.

The Belmont Report

<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.htm>

This is a link to “The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.”

NSF on Human Subjects

<http://www.nsf.gov/bfa/dias/policy/>

This site has a section entitled “Human Subjects” with information concerning the basic principles of human subjects’ protection as well as information about IRBs.

National Institutes of Health

<http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/>

This is a link to the Office of Human Subjects Research, which provides information about the existing legislation concerning the use of human subjects and research (as well as the ethical dilemmas involved). It also provides links to other governmental Web sites dealing with the issue of involving human subjects in research.

NIH on Human Subjects

<http://bioethics.od.nih.gov/IRB.html>

This link is entitled “Human Subjects Research and IRBs.” It contains links to policies and regulations, guidance for investigators, IRB resources, short courses on bioethical issues in human studies, research resources, and human subjects research tutorials.

NIH List of References

http://www.nlm.nih.gov/archive/20061214/pubs/cbm/hum_exp.html

This is a link to a very extensive list of references, all dealing with ethical issues in research involving human participants. The table of contents (you have to scroll down the page a little to get this) breaks down the page into different categories, making it easier to find your specific topic. The bibliography contains information regarding reference materials including journals, books, and government documents.

U.S. Department of Education

<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocfo/humansub.html>

This is a link to the “Protection of Human Subjects in Research” page. This page includes links to general information concerning human subjects in research and the regulations/legalities surrounding using human subjects in research. It also contains information about “Guidance and Educational Materials” (with links to “The Belmont Report” and the “Institutional Review Board Guidebook”).

American Sociological Association

<http://www2.asanet.org/members/ecoderev.html>

This is a link to the ASA’s Code of Ethics. The Code of Ethics is available on the site, and there is also a downloadable PDF version.

American Sociological Associations’ Ethical Standards

<http://www2.asanet.org/members/ecostand2.html>

This list consists of topics such as informed consent, use of deception as a research practice, and so on.

American Psychological Association

<http://www.apa.org/ethics/homepage.html>

This link discusses the APA’s new Ethics Code. It has two downloadable versions of the code as well as links to ethics in the news and ethics resources/reference materials.

American Association for the Advancement of Science

<http://www.aaas.org/spp/sfrr/projects/intres/main.htm>

This is a link to the “Ethical and Legal Aspects of Human Subjects Research in Cyberspace,” which contains a link to the report prepared by the AAAS staff (which was created after a workshop was convened in collaboration with the NIH concerning Internet research involving human subjects).

Indiana University’s Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions

<http://poynter.indiana.edu/links.shtml>

This site contains links to ethics centers, publications, research ethics, research policy, and general information about ethics.

Homepage for the Book Methods in Behavioral Research

<http://methods.fullerton.edu/chapter3.html>

This Web site contains a vast array of resources for researchers inquiring about ethics, including links to ethics tutorials, research ethics Web sites, and ethics guidelines. It is an adaptation of the book *Methods in Behavioral Research*.

Human Subject Research and Ethical Concerns

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/bioethics/guidelines/ethical.html>

This Web site contains the various guidelines involved in human subject research, specifically rights and responsibilities of the researchers, human participants, editors, publishers, and funders of the experiment.

Acoustical Society of America: Ethical Principles of the Acoustical Society of America for Research Involving Human and Non-human Animals in Research and Publishing and Presentations

<http://asa.aip.org/poma/ethical.html>

This Web site contains guidelines concerning recorded interviews and images of human and nonhuman subjects.

University of Virginia Institution Review Board for Health Sciences Research

http://www.virginia.edu/vpr/irb/hsr/ethical_principles.html

This Web site contains links to IRB-HSR information, including a glossary of IRB terms, ethical principles, and other Web sites that discuss IRBs in detail.

Relevant Journals

Bioethics

Journal of Global Ethics

Public Health Ethics

Nursing Ethics: An International Journal for Health Care Professionals

Science, Technology and Human Values

Note

1. Certain types of research that clearly involve no potential risks to human subjects, such as educational research dealing with “instructional strategies,” may have an “exempt status” and not require a full review by an IRB (Department of Health and Human Services, 1989).