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Introduction to Research Methods

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MGM 333

Part 1: Starting the research process

CH7: Ethics in research

Lecture 8

Chapter
07

Ethics in research





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Session Outline

Chapter
07

Session Outline

- ☐ Introduction
- ☐ Gaining access to the field
- ☐ Informed consent
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Introduction

- ❑ Research ethics is a field which is constantly changing, and its boundaries are at times quite fuzzy. What might be acceptable research behaviour one year may be unacceptable the next. (Bow, 1999, 254)

- ❑ Since the mid-1970s professional bodies and universities have established their own codes of practice which set out guidelines for all research carried out within the profession or university.
- ❑ Although these codes are very useful and should be followed, there will always be times when decisions must be made and there is no obvious right or wrong.

- ❑ For this reason I would recommend that knowing and understanding the codes of practice of your own institution is essential. It is also essential to develop your own ethical code.

- ❑ It is important that, as a researcher, you take responsibility for decisions you may have to make quickly and without the guidance of a supervisor or a specific instruction in a code of practice.

- ❑ This chapter is primarily concerned with helping you to understand the possible consequences of research decisions and the implications these decision have for you as the researcher, your research participants, the value and quality of your research findings and the funding body or institution that is associated with your research.



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Gaining access to the field

- ❑ The keys to access are almost always in the hands of multiple gatekeepers, both formal and informal.

- ❑ In most cases those gatekeepers, before giving assent, will want to be informed about the inquiry in ways that will permit them to assess the costs and the risks that it will pose, both for themselves and for the groups to which they control access. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, 253)

- ❑ Gaining access to a research site requires careful planning and should come very early in the research process, usually as soon as a proposal has been approved but often even earlier.

- ☐ It is prudent to approach a number of potential research locations to identify the most appropriate location and to 'get a feel' for the environment.
- ☐ It may be relatively simple to identify the formal 'gatekeeper' within an organization: the head of a library service, the head of a school or principal of a college, or the director of a company.

- ☐ You should write a formal letter of request to the formal gatekeeper asking permission to carry out your research, detailing the nature of the study and exactly what you will be doing while you are on site.

- ☐ It is recommended that you provide as much detail as possible at this stage; asking for more time than you ultimately take is far better than asking for a little then overstaying your welcome.

- ☐ It may be that the formal gatekeeper is very interested in your research and is more than willing to allow you access; he or she may also offer additional help in organizing your data collection.

- ☐ If so then it is very likely that this person will also want something from you in return.
- ☐ Usually this is no more than being given a copy of your research report, but be sure to establish this relationship from the outset.

- ☐ Many of you will be thinking about engaging in research within your own organization.
- ☐ This does not mean that because you are already a member of this community you do not need permission to engage in the research – you do.

- ☐ Be sure to identify the most appropriate gatekeeper and prepare a formal letter of request detailing your intended research activity.

- ❑ **Gaining access to a research site comes in two stages:**
 - ✓ being granted permission to be 'on site' by the individual or group responsible for the site,
 - ✓ then gaining the trust and co-operation of the individuals who populate that site.

- ☐ If you were given permission to spend a number of days observing activity in an academic library, who has the right to give you that permission?
- ☐ You would have prepared a letter requesting permission from the head of the library service to engage in the observation.

- ☐ If you receive written consent to enter the library and carry out your observation from the head of the library service, is that enough?

- ☐ It may be that in your view it is, and it may certainly bring you in line with any code of practice you are following, but does it satisfy you as a researcher? After all, it is not the head of the library service you are observing.

- ☐ What about the individuals whose place of work you are invading? Gaining access and informed consent are very similar once we get down to personal space.

- ❑ It may be sufficient to have written permission to be there but a researcher depends very much on the co-operation of research participants and often 'sufficient' is not enough when it comes to winning the trust of individuals.

- ☐ It is my opinion that every participant in a research study, however small a part they play, has the right to be asked if they are willing to take part.



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Informed consent

- ❑ When research participants give informed consent it means that they understand what they are agreeing to, accept what is being asked of them and are comfortable with the purpose of the research and the intended use of the data they are providing.

- ❑ The most transparent way of achieving this is to prepare a formal informed consent form that is read, understood and signed by all research participants or their parents or guardians.

- ❑ Informed consent forms create a mutual understanding that remains constant throughout the research and provides a reference point for both the researcher and the participants.

- ❑ Schinke and Gilchrist (1993, 83) claim that 'all informed-consent procedures must meet three criteria:
 - ✓ participants must be competent to give consent
 - ✓ sufficient information must be provided to allow for a reasoned decision
 - ✓ and consent must be voluntary and uncoerced'.

- ❑ It is of course your decision as to how far you go to achieve informed consent, depending on the purpose of your research, the research activity, any code you are bound by, and advice from your supervisor or line manager.

- ❑ Although I would always advocate that you should obtain informed consent from your research participant, there are cases when exceptions might be made.

- ❑ If you think it appropriate to ask for informed consent, get the agreement of your supervisor or line manager; never make this decision on your own.

- ❑ There are occasions when it is impossible to engage in research without individual subjects understanding, agreeing to and signing a formal consent form.

- ❑ Individuals who are below the legal age of consent, or those not classed as competent, should never be questioned, observed or investigated in any way without the formal written consent of their parents or guardians.

- ❑ The majority of research with children in information and communication studies takes place within some 'bounded system', such as a school with formal gatekeepers who are in a position to request and receive consent on your behalf.

- ☐ If the formal gatekeepers do this to a standard that is accepted by you and the other stakeholders in your research then it is sufficient, but make sure you know what has been said, as ultimately you are responsible.

- ❑ Providing sufficient information about your research can often be problematic, particularly in qualitative studies where the design of the research is likely to emerge and your needs could well change.
- ❑ Be sure that you are very clear about the fact that the research design could change slightly.

- ☐ In this case remember to be specific about the most you will be asking.
- ☐ It is inappropriate to request a minimum then hope that people will be willing to give you more as the need arises.

- ❑ Include details of the purpose of the research, who will see and read your findings and what rights the participant has in terms of reading and commenting on your analysis before you share it with anyone else.

- ☐ This usually means providing a written statement, giving your potential participant time to read and take in the information, then sign only when they are satisfied with the procedures.
- ☐ It always helps to leave a signed copy of the informed consent form with your research participants so they have this for reference.

Example 7.1 Informed consent form

Title of the research project: Access to electronic information resources: their role in the provision of learning opportunities to young people. A constructivist inquiry.

Purpose of the research: The purpose of this research is to find out if electronic information resources (such as the internet) have a role to play in the provision of learning opportunities for young people. The aim is to discover if these resources have the potential to provide learning opportunities, how this can be encouraged, what works well and what does not. This will create a better understanding of these resources and how they are used naturally, in order to produce guidelines for managing these resources within schools and colleges.

Continued on next page

Data collection and handling: This study is designed to take an in-depth approach to finding out how these resources are used; because of this the data collection will continue for a period of approximately 18 months. During that time you will be interviewed, observed in a number of locations, asked to keep a diary, write a short autobiography and take part in focus groups. At this stage it is impossible to say exactly how long each of these activities will take and how many you will be asked to participate in. Initially all data collection will take place in school during school time and at no point in the research will you be asked to do anything during school holiday periods. All of these activities will be arranged at a time that suits you.

Confidentiality and anonymity: You are guaranteed total confidentiality with regard to anything you say, do or write in relation to this research within the normal boundaries of the law. You will not be asked to reveal anything that could harm or distress you in any way. All data will be identified by a fictional name that is only known to the researcher. Total anonymity cannot be guaranteed as contact with you has been made through your school and you will meet the researcher face-to-face, but no data will be directly associated with you by your real name and in the event of publication no identifying personal data will be revealed. All data will be stored at the home of Alison Pickard and destroyed at the end of the formal period of retention. The only people with access to this data are the researcher's supervisors and examiners who may request to see it but in no way will they attempt to identify you through this data.

Voluntary involvement: You are free to end your participation in this research at any time, you may refuse to answer any questions or take part in any activity you do not wish to engage in. You are encouraged to ask as many questions as you wish. A process known as 'member checking' will be used to allow you to see how the data you have provided is being used.

Please sign and date this form (as you are under 16 years of age both you and your parent/guardian must sign this form)

(Pickard, 1998, Informed consent form, unpublished)



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Anonymity or confidentiality?

Anonymity or confidentiality?

- ☐ There is a distinction between anonymity and confidentiality.
- ☐ You are guaranteed total confidentiality with regard to anything you say, do or write in relation to this research within the normal boundaries of the law. You will not be asked to reveal anything that could harm or distress you in any way.

- ❑ Anonymity implies that the research participant remains totally anonymous during and after the research activity; this can never be the case if the researcher is to meet that person at all during the research process.

- ☐ It is even less likely if the researcher has made contact with the participant through a third person, which is the case in most research studies.
- ☐ You can promise and provide confidentiality, which means that the identity of the participant will not be revealed when using any data provided by that participant.

Anonymity or confidentiality?

- ☐ **Anonymity** means nobody knows who the participant is
- ☐ **Confidentiality** means nobody will be told the identity of the participant.

- ☐ All data will be identified by a fictional name that is only known to the researcher.
- ☐ Total anonymity cannot be guaranteed as contact with you has been made through your school and you will meet the researcher face-to-face, but no data will be directly associated with you by your real name and in the event of publication no identifying personal data will be revealed.

- ☐ All data will be sorted at the home of Alison Pickard and destroyed at the end of the formal period of retention.
- ☐ The only people with access to this data are the researcher's supervisors and examiners who may request to see it but in no way will they attempt to identify you through this data.

- ☐ Once you have made promises to participants make sure you honour these promises, be careful about labelling audiotapes or attaching names to computer files.
- ☐ It is usually better to remove all identifying data at the earliest stage to avoid overlooking anything later.

- ☐ A common tactic used to provide confidentiality is to refer to participants by a pseudonym, or code, depending on the research method being used.
- ☐ I prefer pseudonyms in case study research as they retain the personal element of the individual, but codes can be used if you prefer.
- ☐ The point is to ensure that no real names or identifying information is given when you report the research.

- ❑ This is actually a lot more difficult than it seems; there are occasions when it is almost impossible to hide the identity of an individual or an organization.
- ❑ Many individuals are easily identifiable by their role in an organization; for example, there is only one head of a library service.

- ☐ Simply changing someone's name is not always sufficient to disguise their identity.
- ☐ When this is the case you need to be sure that from the outset you do not promise more than you can deliver, that the individual concerned understands the transparent nature of their identity when associated with their role, and that you think very carefully about what data you will use and how you will use it.



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Protecting participants

- ☐ Harm could be caused by our interpretation and presentation of research findings.
- ☐ Be open and honest about the purpose of the research from the outset and remember that however anonymous you have attempted to make your participants, they will know who they are.

- ❑ Allowing them to see what you will be writing about them should strengthen their trust in you. Stake (1995, 116) states that 'all (my) reports have been improved by member checking'. Member checking may appear to the participants as a courtesy; it will also benefit your research.



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Summary

- This chapter is designed to identify and discuss potential ethical issues that can impact on research in information and communication studies.
- This is a guide but ultimately the responsibility for decisions made during the research process is yours. Be sure to remain open and honest about your research.

- If you are engaged in an academic research project discuss issues with your supervisor.
- If your project is work-based use your line manager as your mentor whenever possible.

- What you must never do is attempt to ignore or dismiss possible problems; they will not go away and you are ultimately responsible for everything that happens during your research investigation.

- This may sound too simplistic but I find that a very good question to ask yourself when it comes to any action you take in research is, 'How would I feel if that was done to me?'

- Remember, your research participants are real people and by agreeing to take part in your research they have done you a considerable favour.

- Respect them, their rights and the details of the lives they share with you, at all times. 'Do not deceive, coerce, breach privacy and confidentiality for your own ambition, prestige or ego' (Burns, 2000, 23).



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Thank You

