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An EU Code of Ethics for Socio-Economic Research

Sally Dench
Ron Iphofen
Ursula Huws

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studies

The RESPECT project is about:

RESPECT for research ethics

RESPECT for intellectual property

RESPECT for confidentiality

RESPECT for professional qualifications

RESPECT for professional standards

RESPECT for research users

The aims of the project are to:

- develop a voluntary code of practice for the conduct of socio-economic research in the Information Society

- contribute to the development of common European standards and benchmarks for socio-economic research

- contribute to the development of high standards in cross-national and cross-disciplinary socio-economic research.

- contribute to broader ethical and professional debates within the socio-economic research community

- help reduce barriers to the mobility of socio-economic researchers within the EU and Accession States

- provide succinct information on good practice in socio-economic research for research users both inside and outside the IST community.

For full details, see the project website: **www.respectproject.org**

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Executive Summary

The RESPECT project (Professional and Ethical Codes for Technology-related Socio-Economic Research) was funded under the European Commission IST programme. The aims of this project were to:

- develop a voluntary code of practice for the conduct of socio-economic research in the Information Society

- contribute to the development of common European standards and benchmarks for socio-economic research

- contribute to the development of high standards in cross-national and inter-disciplinary socio-economic research

- contribute to the broader ethical and professional debates within the socio-economic research community

- help reduce the barriers to the mobility of socio-economic researchers with the EU and Accession States

- provide succinct information on good practice in socio-economic research for research users, both inside and outside the IST community.

The first stage of the RESPECT project involved the development of guidelines, or codes, in a number of separate areas: data protection, intellectual property rights, research ethics, professional issues and professional competencies. Following consultation on these, an overall of code of practice was developed covering all these areas. This was accompanied by a user's guide to socio-economic research, designed for those who commission research, evaluate research proposals and review the results.

This report addresses one aspect of the RESPECT project: the development of a set of ethical guidelines or a 'code' of standards to inform the conduct of socio-economic research in the European Union. These guidelines are aimed at all those involved in socio-economic research, whether commissioning, bidding for or managing projects, or working as part of a research team on a project.

Guidelines or 'codes of practice' offer a framework in which researchers can work. They do not, however, offer all the answers. Making ethical decisions still involves addressing a series of dilemmas and, ultimately, decisions have to be reached by the

researchers involved. Ethical guidelines enable these decisions to be made from an informed position. Ethical guidelines also offer protection to researchers, providing them with a source to quote if pressured by others to adopt unethical practices.

These guidelines aim to offer minimum acceptable standards for the conduct of ethical research in Europe. However, guidelines on their own are not enough; they only offer a starting point. What is needed is an 'ethical conscience' so that making ethical decisions becomes an automatic part of the research process. Guidelines can be used as part of the educational process leading to this.

The guidelines have been constructed at four levels. The first three provide a summary of the main principles and possible dilemmas, and these are included in this summary. The report is the fourth level, providing a more detailed discussion of the issues underlying the main principles, the nature of dilemmas that may be faced in ethical decision making, and how some of these ethical issues may be addressed in practice.

The research aims of any study should both benefit society and minimise social harm

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The general principle

It is the responsibility of both the commissioner of research and the researchers who conduct the work, jointly, to develop a set of research aims and objectives which benefit society and minimise social harm. This means that any benefits derived from the research should outweigh any harm caused.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

How should it be assessed whether the need for the research outweighs any potential harm it might cause? Who should be responsible for making the assessment — researcher, commissioner or some independent agency? How can the interests of the range of different stakeholders be balanced? How can the interests of other stakeholder groups, who may not be directly involved in the research project, be protected?

Who decides what constitutes harm and benefits? How can the different understanding of what these are for different groups be reconciled?

Is conducting research purely for the pursuit of knowledge ethically justifiable?

Is it, in principle, ethically sound to randomly assign human subjects to comparative groups for the purpose of 'controlled' experiments?

> **Researchers should endeavour to balance professional integrity with respect for national and international law**

The general principle

Socio-economic research is a profession whose members have technical and substantive expertise and who work to ethical standards. However, when conducting research, researchers must in general not contravene national and international laws. In circumstances where this does happen, this should be a result of conscious deliberation and decision, rather than due to ignorance.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Is contravening the law ever acceptable?

Which laws apply to Internet research?

What should happen in situations of conflict between the law and ethical standards/philosophy?

> **Researchers should endeavour to ensure that research is commissioned and conducted with respect for, and awareness of, gender differences**

The general principle

In designing and conducting a study, and in putting together a research team, researchers must pay attention to, and respect, gender differences. Whether or not there is equality legislation in a country, attention must be paid to the way people are treated, the use of gendered language, issues of inclusion in research, and the different impact of various methodologies on women and men.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Do particular research methodologies discriminate against women or men?

Are there practical mechanisms for ensuring that gendered language and concepts are not included in any aspect of the research design, conduct or reporting?

How can it be ensured that members of research teams are treated in relation to their contribution and expertise, rather than due to their gender or seniority?

> **Researchers should endeavour to ensure that research is commissioned and conducted with respect for all groups in society, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion and culture**

The general principle

In designing and conducting a study, and in putting together a research team, researchers and commissioners should pay attention to, and respect, all groups, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion or culture. Whether or not there is equality legislation in a country, attention should be paid to the way people are treated, the use of language, issues of inclusion in research and the impact of various methodologies on different groups.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Do particular research methodologies discriminate against people from different racial, ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds?

By what means can it be ensured that different groups are properly represented in research studies, and if not, that this is due to considered rationale rather than omission or accident?

How can it be ensured that racist or xenophobic language and concepts are not included in any aspect of the research design, conduct or reporting?

How can it be ensured that members of research teams are treated in relation to their contribution and expertise, rather than because of their nationality, skin colour, religion, culture or ethnicity?

> **Researchers should endeavour to ensure that research is commissioned and conducted with respect for under-represented social groups and that attempts are made to avoid their marginalisation or exclusion**

The general principle

All research studies must take into account the treatment of under-represented social groups by ensuring that they are appropriately treated in all aspects, from research design to reporting the findings. It is important that these groups are not excluded from research, but also that research findings do not lead to their further marginalisation. Equally, it is important that vulnerable or marginalised groups are not over-researched so that participating becomes a burden for them.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

How is it possible to ensure that these groups are adequately represented in large-scale studies?

How is it possible to ensure that any singling out of these groups is not to their disadvantage?

To what extent can it be guaranteed that findings from research studies are not used to further marginalise and stigmatise these groups?

> **Researchers should endeavour to ensure that the concerns of relevant stakeholders and user groups are addressed**

The general principle

Researchers need to take into account the needs and concerns of stakeholders and user groups with an interest in the research, from the beginning of a project. This will ensure that different groups are properly involved and not just brought in at the final stage when it is too late to make an input.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

When interests conflict, how should this be resolved and which should be given priority?

How should situations be dealt with when treating one group ethically is to the disadvantage of another?

> **Researchers should endeavour to ensure that an appropriate research method is selected on the basis of informed professional expertise**

The general principle

Researchers have professional expertise, including both methodological expertise and substantive knowledge, which must inform their selection of research method. Researchers should have knowledge of a wide range of socio-economic research methods or, at a minimum, a full understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their own specialism, and how this fits with others.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

What is good research? It is important that methodologies are assessed and critiqued from an informed position, rather than on the basis of vested interest and conflicts of interests.

Selecting an appropriate method involves balancing the needs of the client/sponsor with the methodologies available. Conflicts may arise.

The most appropriate methodology may not be possible within the timescale and budget available. It is up to the researcher to

point this out to the client and, where possible, offer an alternative. The researcher should not mislead the client as to what is possible.

In deciding on the appropriate methodology, the full range of ethical considerations need to be taken into account. If the most appropriate methodology is ethically difficult, this needs to be discussed and, if necessary, alternatives considered.

> **Researchers should endeavour to ensure that the research team has the necessary professional expertise and support**

The general principle

The research team must have the appropriate professional expertise (see RESPECT report on professional competencies) to work on a particular project and be given the necessary training to fill any gaps in skills and ensure that these skills are up to date. Members of a research team should be treated in relation to the contribution they make to a project, rather than on the basis of seniority and experience.

Researchers may experience physical and/or emotional distress or harm during the course of a project. They need to be briefed on the potential for this, and the means of ameliorating any harm need to be in place.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Identifying the potential for a research project to cause harm or distress is not always straightforward. What may distress one researcher may have no impact on another.

To fully engage in, and understand, social processes, some element of harm or danger may be inevitable. It is important to balance the potential for harm against the need for the research, and to put in place mechanisms for dealing with the harm or distress caused.

At times it may be necessary to take professional risks and challenge established norms, possibly putting a researcher in a risky position professionally.

> **Researchers should endeavour to ensure that the research process does not involve any unwarranted material gain or loss for any participant**

The general principle

Researchers should not gain commercially or through gifts from interested parties during the course of a research project, apart from the income due to them for conducting the work.

Respondents may be remunerated to cover the costs of expenses incurred in taking part in a study, for example, a focus group, or given an appropriate payment or gift to encourage participation. Payments or gifts of an excessive nature which amount to bribery and which might influence the outcome of a study or lead to unequal treatment are not acceptable.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

When does payment or the making of gifts to a researcher become unacceptable and take the form of a bribe or undue influence?

When does payment to a respondent become a bribe?

What impact does rewarding of respondents have on response rates and the quality of the data collected? When is some form of reward justified to improve these?

When does the burden of research become so great, and unequal to that on other groups, that some form of remuneration becomes necessary?

Researchers should endeavour to ensure factual accuracy and avoid falsification, fabrication, suppression or misinterpretation of data

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The general principle

Any research study should be designed, conducted and reported in such a way that the findings are accurate and not compromised by preconceptions, or by any particular political and philosophical stance.

Findings and data should not be falsified or suppressed for any reason.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Can researchers ever operate in a value-free way? Most researchers work from a particular theoretical, political or philosophical view of the world. What is important is that a project is not designed and conducted simply to reflect and reinforce these views. All stages of the study should allow issues which are contradictory to these views to emerge and be properly acknowledged.

Participants in research studies provide their own perspectives of the issues under study. It is important that researchers do not naively accept these in reporting the data.

Participants may mislead researchers — researchers must ensure that they do not create a situation in which respondents feel that

this is appropriate or acceptable, and that they are aware of any such possibilities when interpreting the data.

> **Researchers should endeavour to reflect on the consequences of research engagement for all participants, and attempt to alleviate potential disadvantages to participation for any individual or category of person**

The general principle

Researchers and respondents can be involved in research studies in a range of different ways: for example, respondents can be involved in designing and conducting a study and researchers can become involved in helping and supporting those they are researching. The consequences of these ways and levels of involvement need to be considered in advance.

Special care should be taken to protect the interests of members of vulnerable groups such as children, older people and those with learning or other disabilities.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

What are the advantages and disadvantages of involving those being researched in designing and conducting a research project? Do the advantages outweigh any negative methodological implications?

How far should researchers become involved with, and change, the lives of respondents? Does this type of involvement impact negatively on the objectivity of a study? Do socio-economic researchers have a duty to address difficult situations and disadvantaged groups when they come into contact with them in the course of their work?

> **Researchers should endeavour to ensure that reporting and dissemination are carried out in a responsible manner**

The general principle

The findings of research should be made widely available, and to a range of audiences. Those conducting the research have a responsibility to ensure that the findings of their study are made available, and in a form suitable to the audiences aimed at. The commissioners of research must be prepared to make research findings available, even when the findings are unpalatable.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

What happens if publishing the findings could cause harm or distress to those researched or to other groups in society?

How can an academic or policy report be made accessible to wider audiences?

Dispute between the researcher and the client or individual researchers and their employers on the interpretation of the findings should be negotiated and not seen as sufficient cause for non-publication.

> **Researchers should endeavour to ensure that methodology and findings are open for full discussion and peer review**

The general principle

Researchers should be open about the research methodology used and any theoretical underpinning, including any difficulties encountered when conducting a study. They should be prepared to submit this for peer review, along with the findings of their study.

There is also an ethical responsibility on those conducting a peer review to perform that function in an unbiased manner, based on professional expertise and knowledge, rather than their own particular political stance or as a means of scoring points. Related to this is the obligation on reviewers to declare a personal interest if the work under review is by a colleague or competitor, or by someone well known to them, with views which they are either strongly opposed to, or that are strongly similar to their own.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Where the reviewers substantially disagree with the methodology used or findings — this can sometimes be on political or ideological grounds and be matters of interpretation. These types of disagreement are not sufficient to damn a piece of work, but rather, should be used to stimulate debate on the issues.

> **Researchers should endeavour to ensure that any debts to previous research as a source of knowledge, data, concepts and methodology are fully acknowledged in all outputs**

The general principle

The intention should be to avoid representing the ideas of another researcher as one's own.

While some research studies are based around original ideas and lead to totally new findings, the majority are based on, and draw on, existing ideas and methodological approaches. In reporting a research study, the authors should fully acknowledge and reference the source of these.

Furthermore, the contribution of those who made a substantial contribution, whether as a researcher, sponsor or in a support capacity, should be acknowledged in any publications.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

When ideas have been recycled through a range of publications, articles, *etc.,* it can sometimes be difficult to identify the originator of an idea.

Similar ideas can emerge from a number of different sources; where this is the case, a range should be acknowledged.

> **Researchers should endeavour to ensure that participation in research is voluntary**

The general principle

All potential research subjects should be given the opportunity to refuse to participate in the research. They should not feel that they are being coerced into participation through deceit or through being put under undue distress. They should be aware that they are entitled to refuse to answer particular questions and to withdraw completely at any stage in the study. An exception to this principle is when the data to be collected are required by law (such as census or electoral registration data).

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Even when participation is required by law, what sorts of limitations should be put on the secondary analyses or uses of such data?

When does persuading someone to respond put them under undue distress? Can researchers be made more aware of the reactions of potential respondents, identifying when they are pushing too hard?

How should relationships with gatekeepers (who protect access to particular respondents — for example, children, people with disabilities and elderly people) be managed? Can permission from the gatekeeper be adequately considerate of the needs of, and potential for harm to, vulnerable respondents?

When proxy or mediated interviews are conducted for a survey, how can care be taken not to infringe the 'private space' of the person about whom questions are asked, or to avoid disturbing the relationship between them and the respondent?

The general principle

For respondents to make informed decisions about participating in a study requires that they are provided with accurate information. Even if participation is required by law, participants should be given as much information as possible about the requirements of their participation and the extent of the data sought.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

How much information should be given to help participants decide whether they will participate or not? How much information can be given without excessively 'leading' respondents? How much technical detail about a study can respondents be expected to comprehend? What constitutes essential information? How available should researchers be to answer further questions from participants?

When should the information be provided and consent obtained? Should information be provided and consent obtained some time before the required response or interview — to allow the respondent some thinking time? Or should it be dealt with immediately proceeding the seeking of responses? If a study is conducted in several parts, should this process be gone through prior to each response episode? Might excessive advance information prejudice the outcome of the study? How much debriefing (and of what nature) should be offered afterwards? Should a signed consent form be used?

Is deception ever acceptable? Are there any situations in which information should be withheld because it might affect a respondent's willingness to participate — such as to increase response rates? It if is only possible to obtain information through covert research (for example, studies of violent, criminal or subversive groups, or of fraudulent or discriminatory practices) how can the researcher balance the need for deception against the value to society of conducting the research? How can the researcher make it clear that collecting the information is necessary and that covert methods are the only means of doing this?

The general principle

The principles of data confidentiality and anonymity should be clarified as part of gaining the participants' informed consent. This should be agreed and understood between all parties at the

beginning of a research project. This must include adherence to the legal requirements provided in the RESPECT reports on data protection and intellectual property rights.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

To what extent can confidentiality and anonymity be guaranteed?

What happens when respondents want to be named?

What should be done when information is uncovered that should be revealed — for example, where a company is defrauding the public, where criminal activity is taking place or when the respondent is a danger to themselves or others? If issues of confidentiality may be overridden for legal reasons and/or reasons of conscience, how is the researcher to reach such a decision?

When researchers are subpoenaed to name respondents in Court, for example, where illegal activities are being carried out, on what grounds might they refuse to reveal the information? What legal and what ethical consequences might they then have to face?

> **Researchers should endeavour to ensure that research participants are protected from undue intrusion, distress, indignity, physical discomfort, personal embarrassment, or psychological or other harm**

The general principle

Participants in research have a right to be protected from questions, situations or interventions in their lives which may cause them physical and/or psychological harm or distress, or which may be seen as unduly intrusive.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

What constitutes undue intrusion? How can the differential perceptions of participants about what constitutes intrusive, sensitive or private matters be balanced?

What causes harm? How can respondents' different reactions to similar situations and questions be dealt with?

Are harm and intrusion ever justified? How can a balance be struck between the benefits of researching and understanding a particular issue or topic, and the impact conducting a study may be seen to have on participants?

Guidelines for Conducting Ethical Socio-Economic Research

Ethical decisions are required throughout the whole life of a research project and in all aspects of a study. Making ethical decisions nearly always involves facing a series of dilemmas. There is rarely one straightforward answer, and decisions need to be made on the basis of thinking about balancing some basic ethical principles, rather than *ad hoc* reactions to emerging situations.

These guidelines outline a set of basic principles that anyone commissioning or conducting research should aim to address when making balanced ethical decisions.

Ethical socio-economic research encompasses the following principles:

- The research aims of any study should both benefit society and minimise social harm.

- Researchers should endeavour to balance professional integrity with respect for national and international law.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that research is commissioned and conducted with respect for, and awareness of, gender differences.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that research is commissioned and conducted with respect for all groups in society, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion and culture.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that research is commissioned and conducted with respect for under-represented social groups and that attempts are made to avoid their marginalisation or exclusion.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that the concerns of relevant stakeholders and user groups are addressed.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that an appropriate research method is selected on the basis of informed professional expertise.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that the research team has the necessary professional expertise and support.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that the research process does not involve any unwarranted material gain or loss for any participants.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure factual accuracy and avoid falsification, fabrication, suppression or misinterpretation of data.

- Researchers should endeavour to reflect on the consequences of research engagement for all participants, and attempt to alleviate potential disadvantages to participation for any individual or category of person.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that reporting and dissemination are carried out in a responsible manner.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that methodology and findings are open for discussion and peer review.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that any debts to previous research as a source of knowledge, data, concepts and methodology should be fully acknowledged in all outputs.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that participation in research should be voluntary.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that decisions about participation in research are made from an informed position.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that all data are treated with appropriate confidentiality and anonymity.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that research participants are protected from undue intrusion, distress, indignity, physical discomfort, personal embarrassment, or psychological or other harm.

1. Introduction

The RESPECT project (Professional and Ethical Codes for Technology-related Socio-Economic Research) is funded under the European Commission IST programme. The aims of this project are to:

- develop a voluntary code of practice for the conduct of socio-economic research in the Information Society

- contribute to the development of common European standards and benchmarks for socio-economic research

- contribute to the development of high standards in cross-national and inter-disciplinary socio-economic research

- contribute to the broader ethical and professional debates within the socio-economic research community

- help reduce the barriers to the mobility of socio-economic researchers with the EU and Accession States

- provide succinct information on good practice in socio-economic research for research users, both inside and outside the IST community.

The first stage of the RESPECT project involved the development of guidelines or codes in a number of separate areas: data protection, intellectual property rights, research ethics, professional issues and professional competencies. Following consultation on all these, they were combined into an overall code of practice for socio-economic research. This is accompanied by a user's guide to socio-economic research, designed for those who commission research, evaluate research proposals and review the results. These can all be found on the project website: www.respectproject.org.

This report addresses one aspect of the RESPECT project: the development of a set of ethical guidelines to inform the conduct of socio-economic research in the European Union. These guidelines are aimed at all those involved in socio-economic research, whether commissioning, bidding for or managing projects, or working as part of a research team on a project.

The guidelines have been constructed at four levels:

Level 1 provides the basic guidelines.

Level 2 draws out the basic principles contained in the guidelines to explain the intentions behind the ethical objectives being sought.

Level 3 offers a brief consideration of the ethical dilemmas to be confronted in achieving the ethical objectives.

Level 4 discusses the principles and dilemmas of ethical decision making. It is the fourth level which makes up most of this report.

The first three levels provide a summary of the main principles and possible dilemmas. The fourth level, which makes up most of this report, is a more detailed discussion of the issues underlying the main principles, the nature of the dilemmas that may be faced in ethical decision making, and how some of these issues may be addressed in practice.

In this introductory chapter, we explore some over-arching issues, including why ethics in socio-economic research matter, an overview of ethical models, and a discussion of some general themes from the literature. The following chapters go on to discuss the main ethical issues which emerge in socio-economic research, adding depth to the guidelines. This report is not a comprehensive or historical review of all the literature. Rather, the main themes and ethical issues have been identified and are discussed using a selection from the many examples available.

There has been a growing focus on ethical issues in many areas of life in recent years. Socio-economic research, although perhaps less obvious to the general public than many other government activities (Windle, 1996), is no exception. Policy makers are keen to ensure that such research contributes to their social and economic goals and is conducted ethically; whilst researchers are keen to maintain standards in their profession. For some researchers, working ethically is fundamental to their approach. Ethical frameworks for the conduct of socio-economic research have existed for many years. The American Psychological Association (APA) established their ethical principles in 1973 (APA, 1982). The ICC/ESOMAR guidelines were compiled in 1986. In recent years, globalisation and the development of supra-national bodies like the European Union have added weight to arguments for transparency and international standards in research.

The Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries have led the way, and many sets of ethical guidelines have been developed covering, for example, different disciplines or particular sectoral interests within disciplines. Some international disciplinary organisations have also developed guidelines with considerable similarities — for example, the International Sociological Association, the European

Federation of Psychologists' Associations and the International Statistical Ethics Committee.

In addition to the large number of ethical frameworks, there is a long-established and growing literature debating ethical issues in the conduct of socio-economic research. This is not equally spread across all socio-economic disciplines. Sociologists dominate — in particular those concerned with qualitative research method-ologies. Psychologists, geographers and anthropologists, and recently those concerned with Internet research (cutting across many disciplines) have all contributed to the literature. Discussion of ethical issues is notable in its absence from the economic literature. For example, a search of the UK's Royal Economic Society index of all articles in the *Economic Journal* since 1982, produced only one hit on ethics — a review of a book not related to the conduct of economics. This omission of ethical concerns may be due to the fact that economists rarely collect their own primary research data. However, many of the debates are relevant to them — in particular those concerning informed consent and the use of secondary data.

The development of ethical guidelines and codes in research began in biomedical research with the 1949 Nuremberg Code. These basic principles have been restated in the 1975 Helsinki Statement and in more recent human rights legislation. At an EU level, most of the concern with ethics in research focuses on science and new technology, and there is a major concern with technology and medical research (for example, European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies, 2000). The literature on ethics in social research largely dates from the 1920s. There has been a recent spate of publications on ethical issues and qualitative research, while quantitative research (which could be argued to raise just as many moral dilemmas) has been relatively neglected. It may be that there is an assumption that ethical issues related to quantitative data are subsumed within more general professional concerns for data protection, informed consent and respondents' access to data.

The recent increased emphasis on ethical considerations is partly a consequence of legislative change in human rights and data protection, but also due to increased public concerns about ethical behaviour more generally. There is a greater emphasis on corporate responsibility: business and public service activities are not value-free and cannot set standards just by meeting measurable performance indicators. Responsibility entails thinking about the consequences of one's actions on others, and the establishment of clear lines of accountability and the redress of grievance.

A definition of ethical problems, as applied to social research, is provided by Barnes (in May, 2001). Ethical problems:

'… arise when we try to decide between one course of action and another, not in terms of expediency or efficiency but by reference to standards of what is morally right or wrong.' (Barnes, 1979)

A distinction is made between decisions based on principle and those based on expediency. Ethical decisions should not be based on what is advantageous to the researcher, project or client/sponsor, but on what is right and just for the range of actors involved (including researchers, project sponsors, participants and possibly society as a whole) (May, 2001). Particular interests govern a research project and can influence the decisions made. Therefore, ethical decisions depend on the values of the researchers and their communities, and will inform negotiations taking place between researcher, sponsor, participants and gatekeepers who control access to the latter. May (2001) argues that the amount of control researchers can exercise over the research process will also influence their ethical decisions.

There are also debates about the extent to which it is acceptable to pursue knowledge at all costs. Bulmer (2001) argues:

'… ethics is a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others …. Ethics say that while truth is good, respect for human dignity is better, even if, in the extreme case, the respect for human dignity leaves one ignorant of human nature.'

1.1 Why do ethics matter?

The growth of interest in ethical concerns in socio-economic research can be attributed to a number of factors. Some of these are specific to the concerns of individual researchers and the research community, while others relate to trends occurring in social and political life more generally.

Looking first at the more general trends, there is increased concern for responsible action and behaviour in both public and private activities. Large organisations are concerned about higher ethical standards in the workplace and in the conduct of business, and there is a large and growing literature addressing corporate ethics and responsibility. Public authorities are expected to be more accountable and 'customer-focused'. Communication technologies are spreading into, or having implications for, many areas of life, and there is concern to limit the potential for harm. Developments in medical technologies open up considerable opportunities for both harm and good. The extent and impact of these are subject to major debate and concern. Legislative change, in particular relating to human rights and data protection, both reflect and strengthen concerns about ethical issues.

Much of the focus on ethics in research from the European Commission has been on science and technology. While social science is not mentioned explicitly, many of the general principles are the same. For example, the report of the European Group on

Ethics in Science and New Technologies (2000) has a section titled 'Why a greater emphasis on ethics is so essential in Europe'. It states:

> 'Contemporary European civilisation is at the same time based on science, technology and multiculturalism. This multiculturalism, however, is moderated by the Graeco-Latin and Judaeo-Christian traditions. These are the historical sources of European values, modern science and technology, and the roots of human rights. Pluralism, tolerance, and open dialogue about cultural and moral differences constitute therefore a distinctive sign of the European idea. Its implementation requires a discussion among all parties in a civil society as a primary source of legitimisation of the rules, to be followed by all.'

> '… science and technology should strive to alleviate the suffering, inequality and injustice, and discrimination that tradition and nature have brought about. Moreover, science and technology should not introduce new suffering, inequality, injustice, servitude, constraints or discrimination. … These challenges require not only recognition and the promotion of individual autonomy, but also vigilance with regard to social solidarity between all individuals. This is to say that supporting individual rights does not mean the setting up of an egoistic society. A market economy in Europe must therefore not exclude a safety net, that is protection for all based on strong collective values.'

This relates closely to wider legislative change, for example, on human rights, as discussed above. Many of these sentiments are also expressed in the socio-economic research literature on ethics. Indeed, some of the shifts in the research debates seem to be moving in parallel directions — for example, the idea that research should contribute to social and other change for the individual and the greater good, and the view that research ethics should be based on a collective consciousness.

Looking more specifically at the concerns of researchers, a number of themes emerge. Edwards and Mauthner (2002) conclude that the concern for ethics is rooted in concerns with issues of power, in particular between the research funder, the researcher and the research institution. One area of concern is academic freedom. Researchers do not want to accept conditions that conflict with ethical practice and place restrictions on their publication and use of findings (see, for example, Furedi, 2003). Another area of concern relates to the possibility of litigation. Researchers do not want to put themselves in a position in which they could unwittingly break restrictions placed on them, for example, by funding bodies. This issue of litigation is also of great importance to institutions involved in research. Indeed, it has been argued that the current concern with ethics in British academic institutions is related more closely to their concerns about litigation than the pursuit of ethical practice in itself (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002; SPA/BSA conference, 2002).

In recent years, there has been greater emphasis on, and debate around, the role of research in leading to change, whether to improve the position of certain individuals or groups, or that of

society as a whole. This is an ethical issue in itself and also has ethical implications, not just for the way research is conducted, but also for the whole idea of what ethical research is and is not. This emphasis is not completely new and many ethnographers have long been concerned with the role of their research in relation to the groups they work with.

This view does, however, seem to have become more widespread in recent years. For example, an article in *The Psychologist* (Raven, 2000) concludes that research which does not provide some greater understanding leading to intervention is:

> '… unethical, incompetent, unhealthy and unscientific behaviour that should not be tolerated in a professional group.'

Friedman *et al.* (2002) write about the loss of trust in professions generally and the need for codes and disciplinary mechanisms to encourage a sense of social responsibility and inspire public confidence. They argue:

> 'The nature of professionalism is … bound up with an imperative to serve clients and the wider society in a manner which is ethical.'

Intrinsic to those working in a number of social science disciplines is the idea of working with people to improve their position. They do not want to compromise respondents or harm them in any way. While 'behaving ethically' is essential, what exactly is meant by ethical behaviour is open to discussion.

1.2 Ethical models

The intention of this report is to provide an overview of ethical issues in socio-economic research, in particular highlighting their range and the nature of ethical decision making. It is not intended to engage in the detailed philosophical debates around ethics. It does, however, seem useful as part of this introduction to consider some ethical models and the ethical approaches within which people are hypothesised to operate.

Researchers may be guided by an ethical code or framework relating to, for example, their discipline or institution. However, as will be discussed later, many of the ethical decisions involved in designing and conducting a research project are complex, and there is not always one simple answer to the dilemmas faced. Researchers, like everyone else, make ethical decisions based on their own moral, social, political and cultural position and stance.

A number of ethical models have been identified to help understand the principled assumptions of various individuals or groups and the nature of the decisions they might reach as a consequence. When dealing with ethical dilemmas in practice, elements from a range of models are likely to enter into the decision-making process. It is generally agreed that ethical codes

or frameworks include elements of several of these models. Furthermore, although general principles play a role, specific circumstances and contexts are important in informing the decision reached.

The ethical models outlined here have been drawn from a range of sources, each of which explores all or some of them in varying degrees of detail (these include Edwards and Mauthner, 2002; May, 2001; Ess, 2002; Johnson, 2001).

In deontological models, or 'duty ethics of principles', behaviours are judged to be right or wrong based on their intent rather than their consequences. The focus is on the motives, intentions, principles and values, such as honesty, justice and respect which guide the choices made. Taking this approach can lead to an insistence that certain fundamental human rights should be upheld, no matter what the consequences. Research which threatens these rights will not be commissioned or will be curtailed. At an extreme, this model could be used to justify actions based purely on intentions, regardless of the outcomes of these actions.

In contrast, the utilitarian, teleological or goal-orientated theories focus on the outcomes or consequences of decisions made and actions taken. The intentions of the person are not in consideration. This approach is underlain by a cost-benefit analysis, to determine which act will lead to the greater benefit. However, there are several versions of utilitarianism. At one extreme, 'ethical egoism' focuses on maximising benefit for oneself; at the other extreme the emphasis is on 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. This group of theories has been criticised for allowing the possibility of 'the ends justifying the means'.

Ess (2002) suggests that in contrast to the United States, European countries are more likely to adopt a deontological approach. His argument is based on data protection laws and the nature of the various ethical codes. Burkhardt *et al.* (2000) come to a similar conclusion based on their participation in a European workshop on biotechnology. Some evidence of this European focus is perhaps provided in the reluctance to conduct experiments of the 'randomised controlled trial' variety in British social research. However, one UK government department has recently commissioned a study of this methodology (Stafford *et al.*, 2002), and is beginning to use it as a means of evaluating various social programmes.

Ess (2002) suggests that a utilitarian approach is more often taken in the United States. Data protection law focuses on economic efficiency, and research guidelines developed in the United States focus on the protection of the individual participating in the research project.

Other researchers looking at various ethical guidelines (particularly in Britain) have concluded that most take a range of perspectives — for example, the SRA (2003), Edwards and Mauthner (2002), Miles and Huberman (1994), list the following influences on different aspects of ethical codes:

● **Utilitarian**: informed consent, avoidance of harm, confidentiality.

● **Deontological**: reciprocity, avoidance of wrong, fairness.

● **Relational**: collaboration, avoidance of imposition, confirmation.

● **Ecological**: cultural sensitivity, avoidance of detachment, responsive communication.

This allocation of different aspects of ethical codes to separate and distinct philosophical categories is not supported by all commentators. For example, informed consent, avoidance of harm and confidentiality classified above as utilitarian principles have also been seen to be rooted in a more deontological approach. It has been argued that they derive from the concern for human subjects protections consequent on the Nuremberg trials (Michelfelder, 2001; Riedenberg, 2000). Thus, utilitarian and deontological approaches need not be seen in an 'either/or' fashion. The principles which they embrace can be both utilitarian and deontological in intent and effect, both approaches supporting the protection of human subjects for their own sake and for the broader benefits to society and the profession from the responsible conduct of research (Ess, 2004).

A third general model, 'virtue ethics', is concerned with the excellence of human character (Johnson, 2001):

> *'A person possessing such qualities exhibited the excellence of human good. To have these qualities is to function well as a human being.'*

This model emphasises a contextual or situational ethical position and the importance of this is frequently emphasised in the literature. Researchers' ethical intuitions, feelings and reflective skills are emphasised:

> *'Ethical behaviour is seen as less of the application of general principles and rules, than as the researcher internalising moral values.'*

Another approach to ethical issues has more recently been discussed: a 'value-based' model with an emphasis on care and responsibility rather than outcomes, justice or rights (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002). In a 'value-based' model ethics becomes part of the researcher's relationships and interactions with society generally (Gaber *et al.*, 2000). While some see this as distinct from the virtue ethics model, others identify an overlap but with particular differences.

1.3 General themes in ethical debates

A number of general themes emerge through the literature. While many of these are not particularly new, the emphasis on different themes has varied over time. These are explored below.

1.3.1 Ethical frameworks, codes or ways of being

The consensus in the literature is that while ethical frameworks are useful for establishing guiding principles, it is essential that the individual researcher develops their own conscience about ethical research practice.

The Social Research Association (2003) reports that guidelines help to resolve conflict. They offer a framework in which researchers should be able to work comfortably, and that departures from this should be '… the result of thought and conscious decision rather than through ignorance'. To this can be added that departures from a framework or code should be the result of thought and conscious decision, rather than due to pressures from the sponsor or client for the study.

Friedman *et al.* (2002), in discussing ethical codes in relation to all professional occupations, point out that such codes enable professionals to make informed choices when faced with an ethical dilemma, so that if they behave unethically they do so by design rather than by error.

Ethical guidelines also help to develop a set of shared values among researchers. They can make researchers more aware of the range of ethical considerations which need to be taken into account.

Francis (1999), a psychologist, concludes:

> *'… formalised professional ethical codes have both a significant controlling and persuasive part to play in helping the development of professionals and the professions.'*

He argues that ethical codes:

- provide a set of reference points which help the less experienced researcher make sensible social judgements
- promote collegiality
- provide a neutral forum for the discussion of values in intercultural settings.

The terms 'code' and 'guideline' are often used rather loosely. Guidelines raise a set of ethical issues which inform researchers about the type of considerations they need to operate by. Codes are more directive, generally providing a set of 'do's and don'ts' as well as highlighting the range of ethical issues. A code usually implies penalties for non-compliance: for example, a researcher or

professional has to sign up to a code to become a member of a professional group and can be disbarred if this code is infringed. In social research there is perhaps a greater emphasis on guidelines. There is no professional organisation to which researchers (whether academic, commercial or policy researchers, for example) have to belong so that they can be 'licensed' to practice, and the policing of any the code becomes more difficult. (See the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for an approach to policing ethical behaviour.)

There is a growing consensus across the literature that having a set of codes or guidelines is not enough. Birch *et al.* (2002) consider that ethics guidelines and committees address different philosophical positions and principles, and pragmatic approaches. However, ethical considerations encountered in research are more wide-ranging than this:

> *'… they are empirical and theoretical, and permeate the qualitative research process. The complexities of researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena raise multiple ethical issues for the researcher that cannot be solved solely by the application of abstract rules, principles or guidelines. Rather, there are inherent tensions in qualitative research that is characterised by fluidity and inductive uncertainty, and ethical guidelines that are static and increasingly formalised.'*

Various qualitative researchers have argued that the researcher is a central active ingredient in the research process, rather than just a technical operator as implied by ethical codes. Indeed, for some, engaging with ethical debates is an intrinsic part of the research, as researchers are engaged not simply with collecting information and extending knowledge, but in changing the quality of life of those they research.

Holm (1997) feels that ethical problems are perplexing and '… require contextualised methods of reasoning', not the abstract rules that can result from codes of practice. Hay (1998) suggests that paying greater attention to ethical concerns in geographical research does not simply mean accepting inflexible codes of ethics. It is also important that researchers possess a 'moral imagination', based on 'sets of prompts intended to encourage informed thought about ethical practice'. Kobayashi (2001) also discusses the need for a flexible approach to ethics, founded in moral contemplation rather than in rigid codes. She raises serious questions about the socially agreed-upon principles that guide such codes:

- Where moral commitments differ, whose are more important, the researcher or the researched (or indeed the sponsor)?

- Why is privacy held in most ethical codes to be a principle that stands above others as inviolable, and how can cultural variations in standards of privacy be addressed?

- What do researchers do in situations where they find their own moral codes, or those of their employer, compromised?

Researchers need ethical guidelines to help bring awareness of the implications of an ethical approach to the attention of a wider range of actors and stakeholders involved in research projects. However, guidelines or codes are only a starting point. The development of a moral or ethical imagination requires something more. For example, the Social Research Association (2003) advocates a mentoring process whereby researchers seek to share their ethical problems and decisions with others.

1.3.2 The need for universal guidelines

One aim of the RESPECT project is to develop a set of ethical guidelines that can be broadly applicable across EU research. This creates a dilemma in itself. The majority of the literature is from the UK and North America. The majority of guidelines collected were also from these two nations; some were European or international in coverage, a few relate to individual countries (*eg* Norway, Sweden, Germany, Spain and Hungary). Creating guidelines that encompass local conditions and requirements in all EU countries is difficult. By raising consciousness about the general principles that apply in ethical decision making, and the nature of dilemmas that are likely to be faced, we hope to identify the minimum standards that should be acceptable throughout the European Research Area.

It is important to consider the cultural norms within the country in which the research is being conducted. If working in partnership with teams from other countries, it is important to develop working relationship within these teams, which take into account culture and working practices. Most of the literature on working in other countries relates to developing and third world countries.

1.3.3 Ethics as a series of dilemmas

While general principles apply, there is rarely one clear course of action for researchers to take in many situations which arise. This is very clear in the discussion of issues relating to respondents.[1] For example, although 'voluntary participation' based on 'informed consent' might seem relatively straightforward to apply, in practice both these principles lead to many dilemmas (see Sections 4.2 and 4.3 for discussion of these issues). Furthermore, in relation to protecting respondents from harm, harm can be defined in many different ways, from a range of

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[1]   Whilst aware of the many disadvantages of the term, in this report we have used the term 'respondent' to refer to a person who is studied by a researcher, or who provides information in the course of the research, in place of the term 'research subject' which is legally more precise. 'Respondent' is used in a broad sense to include not only those who 'respond' to interview questions but also to those who are studied by other means.

physical or mental impacts on the individual respondent to wider societal and political impacts (see Sections 2.1 and 4.5).

Illustrations of the nature of conflicts which can and do arise appear throughout the literature. For example, De Vaus (2002) reports that any survey is shaped by three broad sets of considerations: technical, practical and ethical. The potential conflicts between these considerations require careful balancing. A relatively common conflict is over confidentiality and the anonymity of respondents. The researcher will want to maintain this unless for particular reasons it is agreed at the beginning with respondents that confidentiality will not be maintained. However, once a study is completed and the findings emerge, sponsors may want particular types of respondents to be identified.

Commentators hold different views about the nature of society and these will influence how ethical dilemmas are addressed. Some see society as consensual in which there is co-operation between researchers and the researched. There is a need to establish trust and create empathy between these two sets of stakeholders so that a situation of openness exists in which ethical and other dilemmas can be resolved through consensus. Others see society as basically being in conflict — with suspicion as the guiding principle, and all dilemmas have to be addressed in terms of loss and gains, or costs and benefits for the groups involved.

In all cases, ethics is about dealing with conflict disagreement and ambivalence. Implicit or explicit choices have to be made across the range of ethical decisions possible. Sapsford and Abbott (1996) report taking a relativist position in which there are a large number of ethical imperatives, which are sometimes in conflict with each other. Knowing there can be ethical arguments against a course of action does not take away the responsibility on the researcher from considering the consequences of taking or refraining from that action. Hornsby-Smith (1993) comments:

> *'In the last analysis, the buck stops with the researcher and there are no easy solutions.'*

Others take an absolutist position in which some things are in themselves wrong and should never be done, whatever the consequences. The debates around covert research illustrate this point. By definition, covert research means that participation is not voluntary and participants are not able to give informed consent. To some researchers this is totally unacceptable. Others argue that, in some circumstances, covert research is the only way in which the necessary information can be collected or difficult situations researched.

In many situations, ethical decision making is not easy. Ethical considerations have to be balanced against practical and methodological issues such as how necessary it is for a study to be conducted and the information to be collected. There is rarely a

clear-cut context-free principle to apply (Gorard, 2002) and there is rarely an absolute answer to ethical questions (Hornsby-Smith, 1993). What is important is that ethical dilemmas are debated and that a conscious, justifiable course of action is decided upon.

1.3.4 Research methodologies

There is a general consensus in the literature that the ethical problems of qualitative research are greater than those of quantitative research. There have been a number of new books and articles on ethical issues in qualitative research over the last few years which would seem to strengthen this view. In 1998, Dale *et al.* (in a book on secondary analysis of large-scale quantitative data sets) stated that:

> *'the moral/ethical problems of survey research are less difficult than those of qualitative research.'*

There are a number of reasons behind the arguments that ethical dilemmas are more widespread in qualitative research. Bulmer discusses the greater freedom of action that is possible in qualitative methods. Patton (2002) summarises many of the arguments in the following statement:

> *'Because qualitative methods are highly personal and interpersonal, because naturalistic inquiry takes the researcher into the real world where people live and work, and because in-depth interviewing opens up what is inside people — qualitative inquiry may be more intrusive and involve greater reactivity than surveys, tests, and other quantitative approaches.'*

Qualitative methods, for example, of an ethnographic, observational and/or participant nature will necessarily intrude significantly on the lives of both researchers and the researched. Many researchers involved in these methodologies have come to reflect on these types of issues and particularly on the ethical dilemmas raised.

However, the ethical dilemmas raised through quantitative research are still present and perhaps understated. Some of these dilemmas were discussed while revising the Social Research Association guidelines in 2000/2001, but they do not seem to have emerged in the literature to any great extent. There are a number of codes that specifically address quantitative research, for example, those of the American Statistical Association, the Council of American Survey Research Organisations and the Market Research Society (based in England but an international membership organisation). Indeed, the technical developments that have taken place in quantitative research (for example, data mining) may be increasingly invasive and so raise more ethical concerns than in the past.

It is also argued that sound research is synonymous with ethical research — consideration of ethical issues should be as important in designing a project as technical and practical issues. Awareness of research ethics should be given a much stronger position in research training. In recent years, it has become increasingly common for research textbooks to include a chapter on ethics. Sapsford and Abbott (1996) position their chapter on ethics and politics at the end of their book on qualitative research. This is on the grounds that researchers need to understand the technicalities of research in its social context before they can fully consider political and ethical issues. They still emphasise that the centrality of ethical decisions are central in the research process:

> '… the ethics and politics of research underlies all the decisions we make about research.'

> 'Ultimately all research stands or falls by the way in which the researcher conceptualises the field of study: in the design of the study, the way that measures are defined and measuring instruments constructed, in how the data are coded or clustered or segmented for analysis and in the decisions the researcher makes about what it is important to report and what sense to make of it.'

Ethical decisions can, and do, enter at any stage in this process.

The Social Research Association (2003) ethical guidelines further emphasise this point:

> 'In a very general sense meeting all the preceding obligations as well as obligations to subjects requires that care is taken with research design. Poor design and trivial or foolish studies can waste people's time and can contaminate the field for future research. Thus research design in itself raises many ethical considerations.'

Valentine (2001) takes this a step further arguing that while ethical issues may seem routine rather than intrinsic to the design of a research project, in practice they underpin what researchers do. They shape how access is sought to respondents, the questions asked (and how), and who is interviewed. These choices have consequences for what sort of material is collected, how it can be analysed and used, and what to do with it when a project ends:

> 'As such, ethics is not a politically correct add-on but should always be at the heart of any research design.'

It is generally easier to judge research by its methodological approach and rigour, rather than by how ethical it is. Although there may be disputes over the methodological appropriateness of different methods, the dilemmas raised by ethical considerations can be far more controversial and less easily agreed on. However, as Francis (1999) points out, breaches of confidentiality and undignified professional behaviour are more likely to harm the reputation of a profession than are matters of technical competence.

1.3.5 The coverage of ethical issues

The coverage of ethical issues does vary between the literature, and existing ethical codes and guidelines. In the literature there is much discussion and debate around issues relating to respondents (informed consent, voluntary participation, protection from harm *etc*.). This is perhaps inevitable because without participants, research studies would be unable to take place. Researchers have reflected extensively on their experiences and on the impact of their work on participants:

> *'The sociological research community has responsibilities not only to the ideal of the pursuit of objective truth and the search for knowledge but also to the subjects of their research. Researchers have to take account of the effects of their actions upon those subjects and act in such a way as to preserve their rights and integrity as human beings —* ie *ethical behaviour.'*

Most legislative change relates to these issues. There is also some coverage in the literature of ethical issues in relation to the researcher themselves, in particular on emotional and physical harm.

Existing codes and guidelines tend to be more wide ranging, also emphasising ethical responsibilities to research as a profession and to the sponsors/funders of research. These are touched on in the literature, but to a far lesser extent.

A theme that is generally missing from consideration is the role and responsibility of the sponsor/funder of research in ethical considerations. These issues are most often mentioned when there are conflicts of interest between the researcher and their sponsor, but generally the responsibilities of funders are less well discussed. This is changing in Britain, for example, as the Department of Health begins to extend research governance from medical to health and social care research, and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and Department for Education and Skills (DfES) develop their own guidelines for research managers.

1.3.6 Involving the researched

Another emerging theme — discussed in the ethnographic literature for some time — is involving the subjects of research in the research process. This has grown out of 'action research' and other research close to the policy-making process, sometimes drawing on the ideas of Paolo Freire and his followers in the community development movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Freire, 1996).

More recently there has been a revived emphasis on community involvement in policy evaluations (*eg* evaluations of neighbourhood initiatives) and the users of services in social policy research. This opens up a whole range of new technical and ethical

questions such as: whose policy agenda is being followed; what forms of relationships with communities are appropriate; how to work in partnership with community groups; and how to negotiate policy approaches and desired outcomes among all the interested parties (*eg* government, the community or, perhaps more realistically, different community groups) and the researcher (see, for example, Kobayashi, 2001).

1.3.7 Emerging methodologies — research using the Internet

There is now a considerable literature on research using the Internet, as this technology has opened up a new range of venues in which research can be conducted and means of contacting potential respondents. There has been considerable debate about whether Internet research is adequately covered by extant ethical guidelines and codes. The general conclusion is that use of the Internet does raise a range of different issues (for example, it can cloud the definition of public and private space) and new guidelines have been developed to address these issues. However, a consensus also seems to be emerging that the principles raised in extant guidelines are relevant. Rather, it is the context that is different, and this applies to many other types of research (Ess, 2001).

1.4 Structure of the rest of this report

This report aims to outline the general principles that should influence the conduct of ethical socio-economic research. It raises issues and points at which decisions need to be made and explores the range of ethical dilemmas that may be faced. It also illustrates the complexity of ethical decision making, while suggesting that there are boundaries within which these decisions should be made. The basic principles fall into three broad categories: respect for society, respect for professional expertise and respect for respondents. Each of these are considered in the following chapters.

2. Responsibilities to Society

The first group of ethical principles broadly relate to the responsibilities researchers have to society, including their responsibilities to respect differences within society and to treat different groups appropriately, without discrimination. Some of these principles also relate specifically to the treatment of respondents or the subjects of research. These have been included in this section, rather than in that relating to respondents, as they constitute key underpinning principles.

The principles considered in this chapter are:

- The research aims of any study should both benefit society and minimise social harm.

- Researchers should endeavour to balance professional integrity with respect for national and international law.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that research is commissioned and conducted with respect for, and awareness of, gender differences.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that research is commissioned and conducted with respect for all groups in society, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion and culture.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that research is commissioned and conducted with respect for under-represented social groups and that attempts are made to avoid their marginalisation or exclusion.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that the concerns of relevant stakeholders and user groups are addressed.

2.1 Benefiting society and minimising social harm

The general principle

It is the responsibility of both the commissioner of research and the researchers who conduct the work, jointly, to develop a set of research aims and objectives which benefit society and minimise social harm. This means that any benefits derived from the research should outweigh any harm caused.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

How should it be assessed whether the need for the research outweighs any potential harm it might cause? Who should be responsible for making the assessment — researcher, commissioner or some independent agency? How can the interests of the range of different stakeholders be balanced? How can the interests of other stakeholders groups, who may not be directly involved in the research project, be protected?

Who decides what constitutes harm and benefits? How can the different understanding of what these are for different groups be reconciled?

Is conducting research purely for the pursuit of knowledge ethically justifiable?

Is it, in principle, ethically sound to randomly assign human subjects to comparative groups for the purpose of 'controlled' experiments?

Discussion

There is some debate in the literature relating to the dilemmas relevant to this principle. These are largely discussed in later sections of this report.

The issue of what constitutes harm to different groups of respondents is discussed in Section 4.5, and this is relevant here. However, research, or the findings of research, may also cause harm more generally, for example, to a particular group in society that a set of respondents represent. This is perhaps particularly relevant to disadvantaged groups. Careful thought needs to be given to the possible outcomes of a piece of research and how the findings might be used. Researchers may need to make difficult decisions as to whether they are prepared to conduct a particular study. Another balance that has to be made is when a research study might lead to findings that are negative or disadvantageous to one particular group, but that contribute to the overall greater good in society.

There are various debates in the literature about whether it is acceptable for research to be conducted purely for the pursuit of knowledge, especially when ethically difficult decisions are involved in designing and conducting such research. These issues are also discussed at various points in Chapter 4. Different authors reach varying decisions. Some would justify any pursuit of knowledge. In the case of an individual research project, researchers have to justify their own decisions and address ethical issues themselves. However, when the study involves a research team and is commissioned by a public body, the rationale

becomes different — there is more need to justify the research, both ethically and in relation to the need for the data.

Some existing ethical guidelines make clear judgements on the relationship between the need for knowledge and conducting a research project. For example, the British Sociological Association ethical guideline states:

> *'Although sociologists, like other researchers are committed to the advancement of knowledge, that goal does not, of itself, provide an entitlement to override the rights of others. Members must satisfy themselves that a study is necessary for the furtherance of knowledge before embarking on it.'*

The American Statistical Association goes a step further stating:

> *'Statistical tools and methods, like many other technologies, can be employed either for social good or for evil. The professionalism encouraged by these guidelines is predicated on their use in socially responsible pursuits by morally responsible societies, governments, and employers. Where the end purpose of a statistical application is itself morally reprehensible, statistical professionalism ceases to have ethical worth.'*

2.2 Balancing professional integrity with respect for national and international law

The general principle

Socio-economic research is a profession whose members have technical and substantive expertise and who work to ethical standards. However, when conducting research, researchers must in general not contravene national and international laws. In circumstances where this does happen, this should be a result of conscious deliberation and decision, rather than due to ignorance.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Is contravening the law ever acceptable?

Which laws apply to Internet research?

What should happen in situations of conflict between the law and ethical standards/philosophy?

Discussion

It is clear that in the majority of situations researchers should adhere to the law of the country in which they are researching, and to international law. This applies to a range of legal frameworks, including for example, employment and equality law, that relating to human rights and criminal law. Researchers

should not put themselves, or members of their research team, in a situation in which they (may) contravene such laws.

In most research studies, this is unlikely to happen. However, there are occasionally situations in which, to explore a particular issue, it is necessary to enter situations or join in with activities that break the law. This is most often faced in covert studies, when researchers are aiming to explore anti-social or criminal groups. A number of authors discuss these issues, and the moral and ethical dilemmas they have faced. For example, Feenan (2002) reports his study of paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland. To study this issue, the researcher needed to become accepted as part of a paramilitary group, with the danger that they might have to become involved in violent and illegal activities. Feenan did write to the relevant authorities explaining the research and seeking their guidance on relevant sections in the legislation, and the likely stance of the prosecuting authorities. Their response was not very conclusive and did not commit them to a particular course of action. The authorities themselves may not know what to do if faced with a researcher involved in illegal activities as part of their professional activities. Researchers studying drug dealing and taking and criminal activities may also place themselves in an illegal situation.

When embarking on studies that might put a researcher in an illegal situation, it is important that this is thought through from the outset. The researcher needs to be clear that the need for the information outweighs the possible personal danger of being in such a situation. Many writers (*eg* Calvey, 2000; Feenan, 2002) discuss the need for the data they were collecting. In some cases, it is fairly clear that understanding more about the actions, attitudes, processes, *etc.* of anti-social and criminal groups can help the authorities deal with them, for the greater good of society. In others, it is less clear that the information is needed, except in the pursuit of greater academic knowledge. Whether researchers should contravene the law for such reasons is, for some, more debatable.

In some circumstances, researchers might find themselves contravening a law that they feel is morally or ethically wrong. A historical example of this might be a researcher in South Africa under the apartheid regime. Other examples include situations where there are strong legal curbs on freedom or speech, or on religious or sexual freedom. Researchers would have to feel that they had a strong case and the evidence to support this, and be prepared to take the risk that a Court might rule otherwise. Furthermore, in some countries (especially those where death penalties apply for some crimes) taking such a stance could be very risky.

2.3 Respect for, and awareness of, gender differences

The general principle

In designing and conducting a study, and in putting together a research team, researchers must pay attention to, and respect, gender differences. Whether or not there is equality legislation in a country, attention must be paid to the way people are treated, the use of gendered language, issues of inclusion in research, and the different impact of various methodologies on women and men.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Do particular research methodologies discriminate against women or men?

Are there practical mechanisms for ensuring that gendered language and concepts are not included in any aspect of the research design, conduct or reporting?

How can it be ensured that members of research teams are treated in relation to their contribution and expertise, rather than due to their gender or seniority?

Discussion

There are many issues to be considered in ensuring that research is conducted taking account of gender differences. Most of the literature discusses issues relating to the involvement of women in research, both as researchers and respondents. Many of these are discussed at various points in Chapter 4. There is a large literature which debates, for example, issues of the most appropriate research methodologies for exploring the realities of women's lives. Issues are also raised about the position of women researchers in research teams.

In taking gender differences into account, it is important not to discriminate in some way against women or men. This does not mean that each should be treated the same in all circumstances, but rather, that each should be treated appropriately to a particular research project and situation. Margrit Eichler (1991) provides a very useful 'Non-sexist Research Checklist' and the main points of this are reproduced here as Table 2.1. This is an extensive list of types of problems which can emerge during a research project and that researchers need to be aware of. It is often the case that these problems emerge simply because no-one has thought of them or identified their potential for gender discrimination.

Table 2.1: Non-sexist research checklist

Type of problem	Description of problem
Research component: title	
Overgeneralisation	Title generalises content of study when in fact research has been carried out on only one sex
Based on sexist concept	Title reflects and/or contains a sexist concept (see below)
Based on sexist language	Title contains sexist language (see below)
Research component: language	
Overgeneralisation	Sex-specific terms used for generic purposes
Overspecificity	Generic terms used for sex-specific purposes
Double standard	Non-parallel terms used for males and females
Research component: concepts	
Androcentricity	Ego constructed as male in concepts that are presented as general
Androcentricity	Concept expresses relational quality from the perspective of one sex only
Androcentricity	Concept demeans women
Overspecificity	Concept defined as sex-specific when it is applicable to both sexes
Double standard	Concept classifies the same attribute differently on the basis of sex
Double standard	Concept identifies a behaviour, trait, or attribute with only one sex when in fact it is or may be present in both sexes
Double standard	Concept or conceptual pair ascribes a different value to traits more commonly associates with one sex
Sex appropriateness	Concept based on the notion of 'sex-appropriate' behaviour, traits or attributes
Familism	Concept attributes individual properties to families of households
Sexual dichotomism	Concept attributes human capacities to one sex only
Research component: research design	
Frame of reference	
Androcentricity	Study designed from a male perspective
Androcentricity	Female behaviour assessed against male behaviour, which is taken as the norm
Choice of research question	
Androcentricity	Women excluded from research design even when the research question affects both sexes
Gynocentricity	Men excluded from research design, especially in areas concerning family and reproductive issues
Double standard/sex appropriateness	Both sexes included in research design but different research questions asked about females and males
Choice of research instrument	
Double standard	Different research instruments used for the two sexes
Sexual dichotomism	Research instrument divides males and females into discrete groups and assigns human attributes to each of them
Variables examined	
Androcentricity	Variables related to women's specific situation in two-sex studies not adequately taken into account
Sex of participants in the research process	
Gender insensitivity	Study does not take into account the fact that females and male subjects may react differently to comparable situations
Gender insensitivity	Study does not take into account the fact that male and female researchers and research staff may elicit different responses from human subjects
Gender insensitivity	Study does not take into account the fact that data obtained from informants and authors of statements (whether written, oral, audiovisual, or other) are likely to vary by sex

Type of problem	Description of problem
Unit of analysis	
Familism	The family used inappropriately as smallest unit of analysis
Comparison groups	
Gender insensitivity	Non-comparable groups of females and males used

Research component: methods

Type of problem	Description of problem
Research instrument validation	
Androcentricity	Research instrument validated for one sex only but used for both sexes
Sample composition	
Overspecificity/gender insensitivity	Researcher fails to report on sample composition by sex
Questions and questionnaires	
Overgeneralisation	Questions use sexist language
Sample composition	
Androcentricity	Questions do not allow for total range of possible answers for both sexes
Sex appropriateness	Questions premised on notion of sex-(in) appropriate behaviour, traits, or attributes
Choice of research instruments	
Sexual dichotomism	Research instrument stresses sex differences with the effect of minimising the existence and importance of sex similarities
Other-sex opinions	
Gender insensitivity	People (including experts) asked about behaviours, traits, or attributes of members of the other sex, and such information treated as fact rather than opinion
Coding procedures	
Double standard	Identical responses coded differently by sex

Research component: data interpretation

Type of problem	Description of problem
Androcentricity	Findings interpreted within male frame of reference
Androcentricity	Forms of female subjugation, abuse, or restriction seen as trivial
Androcentricity	Forms of female subjugation, abuse or restriction seen as normal or defended in terms of cultural or ethnic tradition
Androcentricity	Victim rather than perpetrator made responsible for the crime
Overgeneralisation	General conclusions drawn from an all-male (or all-female) sample
Gender insensitivity	Data collected (or available) for both sexes but not analysed by sex
Gender insensitivity	Interpretation of sex similarities or differences fails to take the different social positions of the sexes into account
Sex appropriateness	Sex-specific roles accepted as normal and desirable

Research component: policy evaluations and recommendations

Type of problem	Description of problem
Gender insensitivity	Failure to take into account the fact that policies have different impact on the sexes due to the historically grown differences in the position of the sexes
Double standard/sex appropriateness double standard	Different treatment by sex hidden behind ostensibly non-sexual distinction

Source: Eichler (1991) Nonsexist Research Methods — Appendix: Nonsexist Research Checklist (page 170-175)

The British Sociological Association (www.britsoc.org.uk) provides guidelines on non-sexist language. These are intended to help their members avoid sexist language through illustrating some of the forms this can take and by suggesting anti-sexist alternatives:

'They will help readers to consider the extent to which and the ways in which we either challenge or reproduce inaccurate, sexist and heterosexist assumptions in our work.'

The first point made is that the word 'man' should not be used to mean humanity in general. Instead words and phrases such as: person, people, human beings, men and women, humanity and humankind should be used:

'When reference to both sexes is intended, a large number of phrases use the word man or other masculine equivalents (eg "father") and a large number of nouns use the suffix "man", thereby excluding women from the picture we present of the world. These should be replaced by more precise non-sexist alternatives.'

These points are, of course, specific to the English language which does not have gendered nouns as do so many other European languages. However, given the emergence of English as the dominant working language in EU research, they are perhaps of general importance. It is also, of course, important that the avoidance of the inadvertent sexist use of the words should be avoided in any language that is used for the conduct and reporting of socio-economic research.

2.4 Respect for all groups, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion and culture

The general principle

In designing and conducting a study, and in putting together a research team, researchers and commissioners should pay attention to, and respect, all groups, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion or culture. Whether or not there is equality legislation in a country, attention should be paid to the way people are treated, the use of language, issues of inclusion in research and the impact of various methodologies on different groups.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Do particular research methodologies discriminate against people from different racial, ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds?

By what means can it be ensured that different groups are properly represented in research studies, and if not, that this is due to considered rationale rather than omission or accident?

How can it be ensured that racist or xenophobic language and concepts are not included in any aspect of the research design, conduct or reporting?

How can it be ensured that members of research teams are treated in relation to their contribution and expertise, rather than because of their nationality, skin colour, religion, culture or ethnicity?

Discussion

Key issue here are the use of racist or xenophobic language and the basing of research on stereotypes of different racial, ethnic, religious and cultural groups. Although the language is not directly relevant, many of the concepts outlined in Table 2.1 in relation to conducting non-sexist research are relevant here. Research studies should be developed which take into account how their conduct, the wording used, *etc.* may impact on different groups in the population.

Consideration also needs to be given to how interviews are conducted and when. For example, for some groups, their Sabbath is very significant and they should not be approached for interviews on this day. In others, the relationships between women and men are different, and the conduct of an interview has to take this into account. While in some circumstances recruiting local interviewers or interviewers from the same ethnic group is important, this is not always the case. Fielding and Thomas (2001) quote studies exploring whether the demographic characteristics of the interviewer and the respondent should be matched. It was found that white interviewers received more socially acceptable responses from black respondents than from white respondents. Black and oriental respondents obtained more socially acceptable answers than did white interviewers. The differences were greatest on questions about race.

The British Sociological Association (www.britsoc.org.uk) provides guidelines on anti-racist language. They provide this in the context of a general commitment to anti-racism. Furthermore, they recognise that this can be a difficult issue to address as some words may be racist in certain contexts and not others. They conclude:

> *'Sociologists may not always be aware of any racism implied in their work or their use of language, either because they are not familiar with the current debates or because the use of the term varies over time and according to context. The issues are not always clear cut. There is disagreement as to whether some terms are acceptable or not and different political positions are aligned with different terms. Consequently this guidance can only aim to promote an awareness of the issues in many instances rather than to prescribe or enforce the use of particular terms.'*

SABRE (a network of black researchers within universities, local authorities and the black voluntary sector in Scotland) has developed an ethical code for researching 'race', racism and anti-racism.

Such guidelines are often very specific to the local context and are likely to change over time in response to current concerns (*eg* the radical change in perceptions of Muslim groups in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001). The aim here is not to provide particular prescriptive lists but to encourage a general sensitivity to the ways in which racist terminology may be perceived and used by the general public.

2.5 Respect for under-represented social groups and the avoidance of marginalisation or exclusion of these

The general principle

All research studies must take into account the treatment of under-represented social groups by ensuring that they are appropriately treated in all aspects, from research design to reporting the findings. It is important that these groups are not excluded from research, but also that research findings do not lead to their further marginalisation. Equally, it is important that vulnerable or marginalised groups are not over-researched so that participating becomes a burden for them.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

How is it possible to ensure that these groups are adequately represented in large-scale studies?

How is it possible to ensure that any singling out of these groups is not to their disadvantage?

To what extent can it be guaranteed that findings from research studies are not used to further marginalise and stigmatise these groups?

Discussion

There is a considerable literature on the treatment of under-represented social groups in research and this is discussed in detail in Chapter 4. There is considerable research interest in various under-represented social groups, for example, because they experience particular problems (*eg* unemployment and poverty) and information is needed on the impact of a range of policy interventions; they suffer from discrimination; or to understand their position in society more fully. This brings the danger that these groups can be over-researched. Research can become burdensome, response rates decline and respondents potentially become used to providing the types of response they feel are wanted. The way findings are reported and used can harm these groups. For example, a study of a poor community with high levels of unemployment might conclude that many members

were either work shy or doing well on the 'black economy' when, in reality, they were adapting as best they could to a lack of opportunity in the formal economy. Bacon and Olsen (2003) in their discussion of ethical issues for commissioners of research in one UK government department address issues relating to specific groups. The Irish National Disability Authority is currently developing a set of ethical guidelines for those researching people with disabilities.

2.6 Addressing the concerns of relevant stakeholders and user groups

The general principle

Researchers need to take into account the needs and concerns of stakeholders and user groups with an interest in the research, from the beginning of a project. This will ensure that different groups are properly involved and not just brought in at the final stage when it is too late to make an input.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

When interests conflict, how should this be resolved and which should be given priority?

How should situations be dealt with when treating one group ethically is to the disadvantage of another?

3. Professional Expertise and Standards

In this chapter we consider ethical issues related to research methodologies and substantive knowledge — the ethical obligations that researchers have as members of their professional group, to society generally, to their colleagues and to their research clients.

Existing ethical guidelines include guidance on a range of topics relating to the responsibilities of researchers to their profession and as professionals. Examples from these are drawn on. However, these tend to state ethical principles, rather than providing detail on the nature of ethical dilemmas. Therefore, much of the detail used to illustrate the nature of ethical issues and dilemmas that can emerge during the design and conduct of a research project is drawn from the wider literature on ethics in research.

The basic principles discussed in this chapter are:

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that an appropriate research method is selected on the basis of informed professional expertise.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that the research team has the necessary professional expertise and support.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that the research process does not involve any unwarranted material gain or loss for any participants.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure factual accuracy and avoid falsification, fabrication, suppression or misinterpretation of data.

- Researchers should endeavour to reflect on the consequences of research engagement for all participants, and attempt to alleviate potential disadvantages to participation for any individual or category of person.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that reporting and dissemination are carried out in a responsible manner.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that methodology and findings are open for discussion and peer review.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that any debts to previous research as a source of knowledge, data, concepts and methodology should be fully acknowledged in all outputs.

3.1 Selecting an appropriate research method on the basis of informed professional expertise

The general principle

Researchers have professional expertise, including both methodological expertise and substantive knowledge, which must inform their selection of research method. Researchers should have knowledge of a wide range of socio-economic research methods or, at a minimum, a full understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their own specialism, and how this fits with others.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

What is good research? It is important that methodologies are assessed and critiqued from an informed position, rather than on the basis of vested interest and conflicts of interests.

Selecting the appropriate method involves balancing the needs of the client/sponsor with the methodologies available. Conflicts may arise.

The most appropriate methodology may not be possible within the timescale and budget available. It is up to the researcher to point this out to the client and, where possible, offer an alternative. The researcher should not mislead the client as to what is possible.

In deciding on the appropriate methodology, the full range of ethical considerations need to be taken into account. If the most appropriate methodology is ethically difficult, this needs to be discussed and, if necessary, alternatives considered.

Discussion

Among writers on ethics and socio-economic research there is a general consensus that good research design is synonymous with ethical research. This does not, however, mean that there is always an agreement about what 'good research' is.

Good socio-economic research can only be conducted by those who have the appropriate methodological skills and knowledge. This is reflected in existing ethical guidelines, whether discussing research skills generally (for example, the Social Research Association guidelines) or specific subject knowledge as well (for example, the British and International Sociological Associations).

However, social research is not always recognised as a profession in the way other professions are. There is no legal requirement for individuals to have certain qualifications or professional status to work in most areas of social research. Some commissioners of research compound this situation. Research may be commissioned by those with no particular methodological expertise themselves.

Good research is methodologically sound, based on existing knowledge and conducted ethically. A range of professionals from different research backgrounds can bring varying expertise to a research project. All existing ethical guidelines emphasise the need for researchers to be honest about their expertise and to use it appropriately in any study. For example, the European Federation of Psychology Associations provides guidelines for their member associations on the content of ethical codes. They state (although referring to psychologists' workings in a range of occupations, not just research):

> 'Psychologists strive to ensure and maintain high standards of competence in their work. They recognise the boundaries of their particular competence and the limitations of their expertise. They provide only those services, and use only those techniques, for which they are qualified by education, training or experience.'

The International Sociological Association *Code of Ethics* states:

> 'Researchers should refrain from claiming expertise in fields where they do not have the necessary depth of research knowledge, especially when contributing to public discussion or policy debate.'

Researchers may face a dilemma in that they want to conduct a study but they cannot reach an acceptable agreement with the client about the methodology to be used, or perhaps the timescale or budget. It is not common but it does happen that, after a period of negotiation, the researcher (or sometimes the commissioner) withdraws before the contract stage is reached. This is addressed generally in a number of ethical guidelines. For example, the International Sociological Association *Code of Ethics* specifies:

> 'Sponsors, be they private or public, may be interested in a specific outcome of research. Yet, sociologists should not accept research grants or contracts which specify conditions inconsistent with their scientific judgement of what are appropriate means of carrying out the research in question, or which permit the sponsors to veto or delay academic publications because they dislike the findings.'

Gorard (2002) discusses an evaluation of NHS Direct. He concludes that poor research leading to vague or unclear conclusions tends to be unethical in nature. Good trustworthy research tends to be more ethical. He argues that the over-riding ethical concern should be the 'quality and ''definitiveness'' of the research undertaken'. He further argues that poor research not only wastes the time of participants, but is particularly unethical from the point of view of those not involved:

'There is no mention in the standard texts of those people not taking part in the research, either as researchers or researched. Yet these excluded people are the majority. They, indirectly, fund much social science research and the findings of the research they fund often affect their lives. How would the ethics of research look to them?'

Taking these arguments, the first responsibility of researchers should be to the quality and rigour of the research they conduct. This includes selection of the most appropriate design to address a particular research question. There is a balance to be made here. While on the one hand ethical research is high quality and rigorous, the most technically appropriate methodological approach may be ethically unsound from other points of view. Ultimately, the researcher or research team have to make a judgement that balances quality versus other ethical considerations. Other practical constraints may also intervene — for example, the project budget and timescales.

There is a general consensus across the literature that the ethical problems of quantitative, survey research are less difficult than those in qualitative research. A formal interview situation provides a hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee, in which the respondents are more able to conceal information. Furthermore, they are not exposed to the more probing and exploratory nature of qualitative research. However, others would argue that qualitative methodologies, although perhaps ethically more difficult, are more likely to yield the understanding necessary to address complex social situations and issues. The conclusion that ethical dilemmas are greater in qualitative research may be a consequence of the range of different qualitative methods of data collection and the nature of academic debates among these researchers.

There is relatively little literature which explicitly addresses the range of ethical dilemmas in quantitative research. However, there are existing guidelines which directly address quantitative and statistical research (for example, the American Statistical Association, the Council of American Survey Research Organisations (CASRO), the Royal Statistical Society). While these do not provide the depth of discussion available in the broader ethical literature, their ethical standards do emphasise the need for the appropriate use of professional expertise. For example, the *Ethical Guidelines of the American Statistical Association* include the principle that statisticians should:

'Strive for practical relevance in statistical analyses. Typically, each study should be based on a competent understanding of the subject matter issues, statistical protocols that are clearly defined for the stage (exploratory, intermediate, or final) of analysis before looking at those data that will be decisive for that stage, and technical criteria to justify both the practical relevance of the study and the amount of data to be used.'

There are varying debates about the appropriateness of adopting different methodologies in the literature on research ethics. A prime consideration on which methodology to adopt, rests on the research questions being asked. While the general conclusion is that quantitative research is less problematic, this is not always seen as an ethically acceptable approach. For example, although it may be desirable to obtain representative and quantifiable data on various vulnerable groups, sampling for a survey (if possible at all) can open up a range of ethical considerations. Members of vulnerable groups may feel threatened if they feel their names and contact details are, in their perception, readily available. Burt and Oaksford (1999) discuss the sampling of people who have suffered abuse and conclude it is not possible to do this in an ethically sound way. Obtaining a sample for qualitative research would be possible. De Vaus (2002) provides an example of a study of women who had experienced domestic violence. Names were obtained through the Courts where complaints are lodged as public documents. Many women were very upset on receiving a questionnaire. They had believed that their complaint was secret. Thought needs to be given to the implications of using various sampling frames for research, and the potential impact on respondents. A less formal approach or one that was made through the Courts might have been more appropriate in this case.

Some researchers argued that the more personal and interactive approach of qualitative methodologies not only leads to higher quality data but is ethically more robust. This has been challenged. For example, Kelly *et al.* (1994) question some of the assumptions behind the assertion of certain researchers that in-depth face-to-face interviewing is the most appropriate form of research for women studying women. They used a mix of methods to explore sexual abuse and found that not all women wanted to reveal their experiences through developing a relationship with the interviewer:

> *'Whatever our topic of investigation, individuals will be at different stages in their willingness and ability to discuss it. It means something different to disclose information anonymously on paper or computer than to speak/communicate it interactively with another person.'*

Kelly *et al.* question the assumed benefits of qualitative methods to those participating in a study:

> *'Whilst most feminists have taken the potential unintended consequences of participation in research seriously, many of our accounts are self-justifying descriptions of how we ensured that participation was neither damaging nor exploitative. Few of these refer to explicit attempts to "research" the meaning and impact of participation, as an integral part of methodology. Several feminists have noted recently that the fact that in-depth, ethnographic methods reduce distance means that the potential for harm increases.'*

Returning to the theme of the importance of well-defined research, Fenow and Cook (1991) suggest that:

'A well crafted quantitative study may be more useful to policy makers and cause less harm to women than a poorly crafted qualitative one.'

Issues of social harm are not restricted to women: other vulnerable groups might include torture victims, the elderly, people with an incomplete grasp of the language in which they are being interviewed, or people with mental disabilities.

Perhaps the greatest debate around the appropriateness of various research methods relates to covert research. Although some of the discussions relate to the quality of the data obtained by this method compared to other methods, many of the views on this approach are ethically based. Many existing guidelines condemn any research that is covert or deceitful, although sometimes stating that such methods are acceptable where there is no alternative (this is discussed further in Section 4.3, on informed consent). Covert research, in the form of 'mystery shopping' is routinely used in market research as a way of evaluating the quality of service delivery and, in some cases, the honesty of employees. With the growth of eGovernment and an increasingly customer-focused business culture, such methods are likely to be spread in both the public and private sectors in future, suggesting the need for clear guidelines for researchers. The Market Research Society (2003) provides clear ethical guidelines for market researchers using this methodology:

> *'To be ethical, the client's own staff must have been advised that their service delivery may be checked from time to time through mystery customer research. Where regulatory bodies or sub-contractors intend to use such projects to examine service levels provided, they must ensure that the contracted party understands that this method of appraisal will be used, and advise its staff accordingly. This could be in the form of a newsletter or on the company website. With competitor organisations, such assurances can not be made but the competitor staff or organisation must not suffer any detrimental effect as a result of a mystery customer research exercise.'*

The advent of the Internet as a means of conducting research greatly expands the potential for covert research. There are many opportunities for a researcher to collect information on individuals or groups communicating via various electronic technologies without their knowledge.

Strongly opposing views have been expressed about the validity of conducting covert research. Those who support covert research do so on a number of grounds. It is argued that more accurate data can be obtained. Douglas (1976) argues that society operates on a conflict model — that people lie, deceive, *etc.* — so that any covert method of research is acceptable in the search for truth. When people know they are being researched, their actions may be affected by the researcher's presence, leading to subject reactivity. Covert research overcomes this. Those arguing against covert research conclude that the data from overt studies is just as accurate and revealing — for example, once those being studied

become used to the presence of a researcher and get to know them, they are just as likely to react normally and provide revealing data. Bryman (1989), in discussing organisational research, points out that in overt research it is unlikely that all those with whom they interact are aware of the researcher's presence.

Covert research is most often condemned as unethical and immoral because it infringes a number of basic rights of 'participants'. Those in favour support such research on the basis that it protects 'participants' from harm and improves confidentiality or anonymity. Patton (2002) draws a distinction between academic and evaluation research. He suggests that it is easier to protect the identity of informants in academic research because the researcher is interested in the knowledge collected. In evaluation research it is rarely possible to protect the anonymity of the programme, location or group being researched:

> 'Evaluators and decision makers will have to resolve these issues in each case in accordance with their own consciences, evaluation purposes, political realities and ethical sensitivities.'

Those against covert research often justify this on the basis that a number of strong supporters of this approach changed their mind on the basis of experience.

Covert research is most frequently strongly justified when groups that engage in violent or anti-social behaviours or the inner workings of closed or extremist groups are being studied. Punch (1986) justifies ethnographic studies of corruption in public and private sector organisation — for example, in the police force. Calvey (2000) justifies covert participant observation of bouncers[1] on the grounds of gaining access and the analytic richness of the data collected, which he argues would have otherwise been seriously diminished. He rigorously defends the use of this approach on grounds of methodological necessity and appropriateness. He goes on to conclude:

> '… as with Fielding's (1981) contentious study of the National Front, topics need to be investigated analytically despite personal preferences and political tastes. In fact, more investigative social research should be done on controversial areas, although not blindly.'

Covert research is justified on the basis of the need to collect information on particular groups when the only way access can be gained without endangering the researcher is covertly. However, many studies would contest this. Even covert researchers themselves talk about the difficulties they experience in having to make decisions about how far to go in adopting all the behaviours of a group. In the case of those exhibiting anti-social behaviours, researchers are likely to find their own morals and political beliefs severely challenged. If they don't go along with, or appear not to

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[1]   'Bouncers' provide security at nightclubs, bars, *etc.*

go along with, these behaviours, they are in danger of jeopardising their membership of the group, or worse. Patton (2002), talking about covert research in relation to evaluation, feels that people are seldom really deceived by false explanations:

> *'Trying to run a ruse or scam is too risky and adds to the evaluator stress while holding possibilities of undermining the evaluation if (and usually when) the ruse becomes known.'*

The selection of appropriate research method is based on many decisions. Researchers need to have knowledge of a wide range of socio-economic research methods or, at a minimum, a full understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their own specialism. Selecting the appropriate method involves balancing the needs of the client or sponsor with the methodologies available, while also taking a range of ethical considerations into consideration. Some specific ethical issues related to particular research methods have been outlined above. However, consideration also needs to be given to the implications of a particular research method for the whole range of ethical issues discussed in this report.

3.2 Ensuring the research team has the necessary professional expertise and support

The general principle

The research team must have the appropriate professional expertise (see RESPECT report on professional competencies) to work on a particular project and be given the necessary training to fill any gaps in skills and ensure that these skills are up to date. Members of a research team should be treated in relation to the contribution they make to a project, rather than on the basis of seniority and experience.

Researchers may experience physical and/or emotional distress or harm during the course of a project. They need to be briefed on the potential for this, and the means of ameliorating any harm need to be in place.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Identifying the potential for a research project to cause harm or distress is not always straightforward. What may distress one researcher may have no impact on another.

To fully engage in and understand social processes, some element of harm or danger may be inevitable. It is important to balance the potential for harm against the need for the research, and to put in place mechanisms for dealing with the harm or distress caused.

At times, it may be necessary to take professional risks and challenge established norms, possibly putting a researcher in a risky position professionally.

Discussion

The idea that researchers can be harmed in some way through the research process has long been acknowledged, but it is only recently that this area has been more fully explored. Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000) point out that although employers are expected to make risk assessments in relation to health and safety in the workplace, they rarely extend this to address the potential dangers of researchers working in the field. They attribute this to two traditional beliefs:

- research is 'an individual vocation and craft', meaning that the 'occupational risks of doing research have not been recognised'.

- the idea of research 'excellence' being bound up with the notion of a researcher breaking new ground, and that this inevitably means taking risks and making choices.

There has been some shift recently as individual employers, perhaps less in the academic world than in other sectors, have begun to recognise their responsibility to employees when outside the office. The Social Research Association in Britain has also endorsed a *Code of Safety* which addresses these issues.

Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000) suggest four types of danger facing researchers:

- physical

- emotional

- ethical

- professional.

Hubbard *et al.* (2001) develop the idea of emotional danger using Hochschild's (1983) concept of 'emotional labour'. Others, for example: Bulmer (2001), Calvey (2000), Maynard (1994), Patton (2002), Parr (2001), as well as many others referred to in these books and chapters, discuss and comment particularly on the first two of these. The overall argument is not that all elements of risk and danger should be avoided (although some undoubtedly should). Rather, it is suggested that at the design stage these issues should be considered and a decision made as to how far they are acceptable, and how to deal with the risks that do arise. It is not always possible to foresee the dangers and risks which might arise from a research project, so as with so many other ethical issues, this needs to be reassessed and addressed throughout a project.

Some might not consider the potential for risk and harm to a researcher as an ethical issue. Perhaps when researchers are putting themselves in a potentially difficult position, this is the case. However, many research projects are commissioned by funders who want particular types of information, or are conducted by teams of researchers for whom the project manager and/or their employer have some responsibility. In these circumstances, those sponsoring or managing the research need to be sure that they are being ethical in what they expect the research team to do.

In justification of some danger being acceptable, the point is made by many authors that to fully engage in, and understand, social processes, some danger is inevitable for some groups/situations. Understanding and experiencing some of the dangers (physical or emotional) that respondents experience enriches the quality of the data collection and interpretation of the findings.

Physical danger

The types of danger which researchers might experience are wide-ranging and some of these will not be easily foreseen at the beginning of a project. Physical danger has been longest recognised, although Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000) suggest that the Chicago School of Sociology was built on the elevation of the endurance of physical danger:

> '… the researcher's account of narrow escape and nerve in the face of danger have often been taken to indicate commitment to the pursuit of knowledge.'

Physical danger can range from being at risk from the group being studied, law enforcement agencies (if the group is engaged in anti-social and illegal activities) or, in some situations, rivals to the group being studied. In health studies, the researcher may be in danger of catching certain infections and diseases. At a more mundane level, travelling to conduct an interview, especially in certain areas at night or to isolated locations, may also carry a risk to personal safety. In some circumstances, women researchers and researchers from ethnic minorities may be exposed to sexual or racial harassment, or attack.

Emotional danger

Emotional danger is defined by Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000) as '… experience of severe threat due to negative ''feeling states'' induced by the research process'. They write of researchers experiencing extreme trauma and distress as a result of conducting interviews, not just feeling uncomfortable. Other authors talk about having to deal with feeling uncomfortable in certain situations as well as more severe distress. The complexity of this issue has to be recognised. For example, what might simply

slightly upset one researcher might severely distress another, depending on their previous personal experiences. This is not always predictable in advance, especially in in-depth qualitative studies where the exact form of an interview can develop as the interview progresses.

There are a range of potential emotional dangers in conducting research. For some researchers studying topics such as torture, bereavement, child abuse and domestic violence, the accounts they hear can have a long-term psychological impact. Their views of life may be challenged and some even decide to withdraw from the research process (an individual project or completely). For example, Kirkwood (1999) found her research so emotionally stressful that she sought counselling, although retrospectively she could see that these emotions played an important role in the quality of her analysis. Kobayashi (2001) discusses the emotions raised when conducting interviews with people with racist views. This can cause discomfort and anger at the respondent personally, while at the same time the researcher needs to maintain rapport to continue with the research.

Other emotional experiences may be unexpected. Lankshear (2000), reflecting on her experiences carrying out research in a maternity unit, was surprised at how this led to her recalling and questioning her own experiences of childbirth and motherhood. Parr (2001) discusses her feelings of 'being hopelessly inadequate' during her ethnographic study of care homes for elderly people, and her anger at seeing the way the residents were treated and disempowered.

There is considerable discussion in the literature about whether a researcher should offer counselling or some other kind of support. Much of this relates to whether the involvement of the interviewer beyond the research enriches or reduces the quality of the data and analysis. However, there are also ethical considerations. Cannon (1989), in her study on breast cancer, shows the mutual exchange of information and feeling which can occur. There is a more intense experience when the researcher and the respondent share aspects of their lives, and this can enrich the research. However, not all researchers want to share their lives, or they may find aspects of their personal experiences too painful. Furthermore, in providing counselling, not all researchers are able or prepared to offer such support, and this can create an additional emotional burden on them.

A range of suggestions are made in the literature on approaches and mechanisms which can help researchers deal with emotional distress. If a research team studying issues where the potential for such distress arises is to operate effectively, such measures need to be considered from the outset. These include:

- 'Debriefing' of interviewers and the sharing of experiences within a team (Patton, 2002).

- Knowing that emotional distress might occur and being prepared in some way for this; keeping in touch with other researchers and friends with whom to discuss these issues; keeping a personal diary (Lofland and Lofland, 1995).

- Brannen (1988) suggests that to protect the researcher from being drawn into the respondent's problems, having a second researcher nearby (but not involved) may reduce the intensity of the situation. She also suggests that 'researcher-support' should be formalised as part of the research process.

Ethical danger

Researchers are in ethical danger if they ignore the risks and responsibilities to behave ethically although, as has been discussed in this report, defining sound ethical behaviour is not straight-forward. Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000) argue that:

> '… researchers have an ethical responsibility to undertake an assessment of the risks that participants and society at large may face as a consequence of their work.'

Another form of ethical danger is where researchers are placed, or place themselves, in a position where their own moral and political views are severely challenged. This is perhaps most likely in covert studies, where the researcher is pretending to be part of the group under study. It is very difficult to refuse to act as a member of the group without compromising the study or giving themselves away. However, in a range of interview situations, researchers may have to control their emotions as respondents express unacceptable or extreme views.

Professional danger

Lee-Treweek and Linkogle identify a number of professional dangers which researchers might experience. They define this as:

> '… serious risk associated with the consequences of challenging or deviating from existing occupational dynamics and collegial preoccupations.'

The dangers identified all relate to ethical dilemmas, as researchers have to decide how to behave and what approach to take. Further-more, if aspects of sound ethical behaviour include conducting good quality research and pushing forward the frontiers of understanding and knowledge, researchers do, at times, need to take professional risks and challenge the established norms.

Professional dangers include (although Lee-Treweek and Linkogle are focusing on academic research):

- going beyond the boundaries of accepted methodologies
- criticising the structures which maintain power relations

- undertaking controversial research on powerful, possibly litigious, groups.

The consequences can mean marginalisation in the profession, including difficulties in obtaining research funding, getting published and obtaining employment. The authors conclude:

> *'Professional danger is therefore one of the most insidious dangers in the research process because it can constrain what social science researchers feel able to study, to say or to challenge. … Ultimately, many forms of professional danger impact on the integrity and vitality of the social science disciplines as a whole, damaging their ability to be emergent, innovative and exciting.'*

Addressing professional dangers is also the ethical responsibility of those researchers in a secure and central position (including commissioners of research). If, as the quote above suggests, research is to challenge accepted norms and move understanding forward, unexpected and unacceptable findings have to be considered. This means that researchers, as addressed in a number of existing guidelines, must be supportive of their profession. Research methodologies and findings should be debated from an informed position, rather than on the basis of conflict and scoring points.

Treating colleagues as equals

The main examples in the literature relate to the treatment of contract research staff in universities, many of whom are women. Ethnic minority researchers and those with a disability may also find themselves at a disadvantage. Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000) report that the management of research project staff and temporary staff is an ethical issue which is rarely considered.

Scott (1984) discusses the way in which lower-status workers, who are usually women, are treated within the academic hierarchy. Younger researchers can find themselves undertaking the face-to-face interviews for higher-status colleagues and fund-holders. They have little influence in the design or research process, including the analysis and interpretation of the data they collect. Their names are often left off key publications. The British Sociological Association has recently (2001) developed a set of guidelines on authorship which aim to address this latter issue.

3.3 Avoiding unwarranted material gain or loss to any participant

The general principle

Researchers should not gain commercially, or through gifts from interested parties, during the course of a research project, apart from the income due to them for conducting the work.

Respondents may be remunerated to cover the costs of expenses incurred in taking part in a study — for example, a focus group — or given an appropriate payment or gift to encourage participation. Payments or gifts which amount to bribery and which might influence the outcome of a study or lead to unequal treatment are not acceptable.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

When does payment or the making of gifts to a researcher become unacceptable and take the form of a bribe or undue influence?

When does payment to a respondent become a bribe?

What impact does the rewarding of respondents have on response rates and the quality of the data collected? When is some form of reward justified to improve these?

When does the burden of research become so great, and unequal to that on other groups, that some form of remuneration becomes necessary?

Discussion

The literature focuses on whether respondents should be rewarded or not. However, researchers can also be open to unwarranted material gain. For example, they may be 'wined and dined' or given gifts by powerful interests wanting to influence the outcome of a research study. This is closely related to the need to conduct research in an unbiased manner (see Section 3.4). Researchers should be very wary of any gifts, financial or otherwise, offered to them during the course of a study, and the expectations placed on them which may go with these.

Existing guidelines are very clear that researchers should not make payments or give gifts to clients, especially where this can, in any way, be construed as constituting bribery or as leading to unfair competition or influence. For example, the Council for American Survey Research Organisations code states:

> 'Bribery in any form and in any amount is unacceptable and is a violation of a Research Organisation's fundamental, ethical obligations. A Research Organisation and/or its principals, officers and employees should never give gifts to Clients in the form of cash. To the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations, a Research Organisation may provide nominal gifts to Clients and may entertain Clients, as long as such entertainment is modest in amount and incidental in nature.'

The issue of whether respondents should be rewarded in some way for participating in a research study is another contentious area. It is generally accepted that participants in a focus group which involves travelling to some central location should be given some sort of remuneration. This is to cover the costs of travel and

the extra time and effort involved in travelling. However, views and experiences are less clear cut on rewarding participants in other types of research. There are ethical and methodological issues at stake here.

Patton (2002) argues that issues of reward are becoming more important in western societies as people in economically disadvantaged communities begin to react to being over-studied and undervalued. He also provides quotes from a discussion on an Internet 'listserv' discussion group which illustrates a range of attitudes in favour of paying respondents. For example, commentators felt that if the input of participants is valuable they should be paid for their time, reward can increase participation, a research interview is a business transaction and it is only right to pay the respondent for their time and effort.

Impact on participation in research

There is varying evidence on the impact of incentives on response rates and 'item non-response' within surveys. Reed (in Patton, 2002) concludes on the basis of using incentives among low-income and professional groups that:

> *'The bottom line is that in most cases the incentive doesn't make a lot of difference in terms of participation rates, especially if you have well-trained interviewers and well-designed data collection procedures.'*

In their *Code of Standards and Ethics in Survey Research,* the Council of American Survey Research Organisations states that 'providing a gift or monetary incentive adequate to elicit co-operation' is allowable.

Impact on data quality

A range of studies have concluded that the payment of incentives does not impact on the quality of the data collected, particularly in survey research. For example, Singer *et al.* (1998) found no evidence that the quality of response, measured by the proportion of 'don't know' and 'not answered' responses to some key questions, was less amongst those who thought respondents should be paid than amongst others.

The evidence on various types of qualitative research is more mixed. For example, Thompson (1996) looks at paying participants in ethnographic research. The usual argument against the payment of incentives in this type of research is that it leads to increased bias. Her study found that payment reduces some kinds of bias. She concluded that payments in her study helped to avoid bias which might have resulted from the omission of those who declined to participate because they put a greater value on their time, energy and views.

Fielding (2001) quotes the example of Margaret Mead's study in which her Samoan island respondents mis-informed her, partly to maintain the flow of rewards she used to encourage participation.

An alternative to rewarding the respondent is to incentivise a survey through making a charitable donation. The results of the impact of this are not very conclusive. Tzamourani (2000) reviews some of the evidence. Some studies have found that a charitable donation leads to higher response rates compared to a reward given to the respondent; others have found the opposite. The amount of money being paid to charity for each individual was usually very small, although in total this would build up during the course of a survey. Tzamourani (2000) reports her own study, concluding that promising a £1 donation to charity had no positive effect on response rates and very little impact on 'item non-response'.

Non-financial rewards

A number of qualitative researchers talk about providing non-financial rewards to participants. These are usually in the form of some sort of feedback of the findings. This is rarely provided as an incentive to participate, but rather in recognition of the value that researchers place on information provided. Valentine (2001) feels that the least a researcher can do is to feed back the findings to respondents, as an appreciation of the time they devoted to the study and the experiences, thoughts, and even emotions, they contributed. Where the research is on-going, this can lead to greater commitment and fuller responses. For example, Patton (2002) reports his experience of conducting family history interviews and giving them a copy of their interview in return. He found that this was greatly appreciated and increased the depth of responses, because they were not just telling their story to the interviewer but also to future generations.

Researchers studying marginal or neglected groups (for example, Skeggs, 1994) have reported that participants often expressed pleasure that anyone was interested enough to hear and document their stories. This gave them a feeling of greater self-worth.

Ethical concerns

There is slight evidence on whether rewarding research participants can have a negative impact on response rates and data quality. In most cases, it seems to make little if any difference, although there are some exceptions to this. Some authors do, however, raise a number of ethical concerns.

Paying incentives or rewards does increase the cost of research, sometimes very significantly. Therefore, unless it emerges that payment is essential to ensure adequate response rates and good quality data, it is unlikely to become widespread. However,

ethical considerations do enter into the decision. For example, if it is decided to pay incentives to, for example, 'hard-to-reach' respondents (however this is defined), this raises the issue of fairness in the treatment of respondents.

An issue when paying respondents who are on a low income or on benefits is whether this impacts on their other entitlements. Is this considered as income which they have to declare? Similarly, there may be tax implications for some respondents.

In organisational studies, respondents are employees who could be seen as representing their employer and who are, evidently, being paid a salary. Patton (2002) quotes an example of people refusing the incentive because they had no mechanism for turning it over to the company and being bothered about the ethics of keeping it for themselves. Some took it and, for example, put it in the office social fund, others just pocketed it. This again raises issues of fairness, but also whether the incentive is really making a difference to participation.

Another issue is the level of remuneration necessary to make participation worthwhile. For some, whether because they are wealthy or because they value their time and perhaps themselves more highly, the amount needed to make a difference will be significantly higher compared to their opposites.

Singer *et al.* (1998) discuss the use of differential incentives to convert refusals, which is common in the United States. They are concerned whether this is perceived as unfair and whether it will adversely affect future attitudes towards surveys and willingness to co-operate.

Reed (2000) quoted in Patton (2002) concludes:

> *'In some instances, for example, well-chosen incentives can make a significant difference. My plea here is that colleagues do not fall into the trap of using incentives as a crutch but that they constantly examine and re-examine the whole issue of incentives and not simply assume that they are either needed and/or effective.'*

3.4 Ensuring factual accuracy and avoiding falsification

The general principle

Any research study should be designed, conducted and reported in such a way that the findings are accurate and not compromised by preconceptions, or by any particular political and philosophical stance.

Findings and data should not be falsified or suppressed for any reason.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Can researchers ever operate in a value-free way? Most researchers work from a particular theoretical, political or philosophical view of the world. What is important is that a project is not designed and conducted simply to reflect and reinforce these views. All stages of the study should allow issues which are contradictory to these views to emerge and be properly acknowledged.

Participants in research studies provide their own perspectives of the issues under study. It is important that researchers do not naively accept these in reporting the data.

Participants may mislead researchers — researchers must ensure that they do not create a situation in which respondents feel that this is appropriate or acceptable, and that they are aware of any such possibilities when interpreting the data.

Discussion

The aim of conducting research is to provide objective[1] findings on a particular topic. This means that the research design and resulting findings are conducted in such a way that the findings are accurate and not compromised, for example, by preconceptions or the political stance taken. As discussed in the previous section, there are debates around the appropriateness of different method-ologies, both ethically and in relation to the research questions being asked.

The objectivity of researchers

In an ideal world, a researcher will design, conduct and report on a study which is based on an unbiased view of the world, and not influenced by political or theoretical perspectives. In practice this is extremely unlikely. However, researchers do need to maintain their objectivity in as far as they do not, for example, look for preconceived patterns or answers, that they recognise and acknowledge the perspective they are coming from, and that they avoid falsifying or suppressing evidence which counters their own viewpoint. Sapsford and Abbott (1996) point out that:

> *'… theory, concepts and operationalised measures can embody ideologies or discourses, models of the world and of how questions about it are legitimately framed. Thus a line of research can be so*

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[1] In using the word 'objective' we realise that it is controversial. It may be argued that social and economic data are socially constructed and therefore never entirely free from the values of those who were involved in their creation. Nevertheless, it is possible to combine a recognition of the impossibility of a lack of *absolute* factual objectivity with the aim of striving for impartiality and the obligation to avoid falsification of evidence.

imbued with a particular (unacknowledged) view that its conclusions must fall within that world view and reinforce or validate it.'

The International Sociological Association *Code of Ethics* states that:

'Sociologists should be aware of the fact that their assumptions may have an impact upon society. Hence their duty is, on the one hand, to keep an unbiased attitude as far as possible, while, on the other hand, to acknowledge the tentative and relative character of the results of their research and not to conceal their own ideological position(s). No sociological assumption should be presented as indisputable truth.'

Some studies set out to prove certain things, rather than taking a broader view. Raven (2000) argues that designing a study to prove a particular view is *'both highly unethical and deeply unscientific'* (in terms of lacking objectivity). He uses the example of research psychologists aiming to show that certain educational practices do or do not have particular effects on pupils. Ethical and objective research would look at all the short- and long-term intended and unintended effects of particular practices, so that a judgement can be made about those most appropriate to adopt.

Maynard (1994) challenges the ability of researchers to produce neutral, objective and value-free facts. She argues that providing data through any kind of research involves some form of social construction. This includes interpretation of the findings, in that no study can be politically neutral, completely inductive or just based on grounded theory. A researcher has to draw a line between interpreting the data to answer the research questions posed, and 'twisting' it to reflect their own view of the world. One way of addressing this is to show the results to participants in the study (Glucksmann, 1994). However, this can still lead to biased or unrepresentative interpretations. The researcher is presenting a collective view of the data, while a participant has individual experiences and opinions which they may not always be able to place in the context of the collective whole.

Oakley (1981) challenges whether any interviewing is unbiased — researchers find it difficult not to make judgements or follow their own perspectives. Kobayashi (2001) discusses the difficulties in remaining neutral and objective when a researcher does not like the people being interviewed, or their views are unpalatable or clash with the researcher's view of the world.

In some research approaches, the researcher may become so identified with those being studied that they are unable (or find it very difficult) to detach themselves from respondents' views of the world.

Sapsford and Abbott (1996) challenge the tendency to adopt what they call 'taken-for-granted' ways of conceptualising an issue. This shapes how a study is formulated, and this in turn restricts what can emerge in the findings, based on pre-conceived models of society. They argue that it is not possible to work in a vacuum.

However, it is important to recognise the perspective taken, to think about what has been taken for granted and how this might affect the conclusions drawn. They conclude that the:

> *'… use of existing and accepted methods of research, grounded in the "knowledge base" of a discipline, may sometimes amount to taking sides in a potential dispute.'*

The research which led to the development of intelligence tests and the subsequent use of these is an illustration of this.

Issues relating to respondents

Placing too much reliance on the raw reports of respondents does not necessarily mean that research is objective. Participants in research studies are conscious, speaking and meaning-creating beings (Marsh, 1979). Naïve research can be as unobjective as that biased towards particular perspectives on the world. This is further explored in some of the literature. For example, Maynard (1994) explains how a reliance on women's own understanding of their experiences is not without problems:

> *'People's accounts of their lives are culturally embedded. Their descriptions are also a construction of the events that occurred, together with an interpretation of them.'*

Research participants may take the opportunity to mislead a researcher, to offer opinions which they think the researcher wants to hear, or to play games of some sort. For example, Fielding (2001) discusses how the islanders in Margaret Mead's study fed her accounts which were consistent with her own prejudices and beliefs. Bryman (1989) writes of the potential for individuals or groups to play off against each other in organisational research.

Participant observers have to be aware of the potential they have to influence the behaviour of their respondents, simply due to their presence.

Structured interviews conducted in the course of quantitative studies are also open to bias of this sort. For example, the order of the questions, or the way in which they are worded, can influence respondents to think of issues in particular ways and give certain responses. Interviewers may also influence responses by the way they ask questions or other, perhaps non-verbal, messages.

3.5 Reflecting on the consequences of research engagement for all participants

The general principle

Researchers and respondents can be involved in research studies in a range of different ways: for example, respondents can be

involved in designing and conducting a study and researchers can become involved in helping and supporting those they are researching. The consequences of these ways and levels of involvement need to be considered in advance.

Special care should be taken to protect the interests of members of vulnerable groups such as children, older people and those with learning or other disabilities.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

What are the advantages and disadvantages of involving those being researched in designing and conducting a research project? Do the advantages outweigh any negative methodological implications?

How far should researchers become involved with, and change, the lives of respondents? Does this type of involvement impact negatively on the objectivity of a study? Do socio-economic researchers have a duty to address difficult situations and disadvantaged groups when they come into contact with them in the course of their work?

Discussion

Ethical issues here relate both to the extent to which researchers should get involved with their respondents and the extent to which those being studied should be involved in the research, other than as participants.

Participant involvement in research

The involvement of the groups or communities under study is not new in that there are well established research methodologies in which this occurs. However, in recent years there has been a focus on community involvement in policy evaluations (Kobayashi [2001] in Canada; papers at SRA conference [2002] in Britain). This is perhaps some reflection of the number of programmes aimed at particular communities and the desire to gain community involvement in all aspects of their delivery. This creates new challenges for researchers, practically and methodologically, but also raises ethical issues, for example, around informed consent and the anonymity and confidentiality of responses. Questions arise concerning the client for whom the research is being conducted and the expected outcomes. For example, the local or central government agencies commissioning the research will have information needs specific to the evaluation and these may conflict with the expectations of the local community.

Todhunter (2001) discusses an action research project used to activate a community in illicit drugs prevention. The research did stimulate community awareness around this issue. An action plan

was developed and a community forum emerged involving local residents and representatives of local agencies. Conflicts began to emerge as the regeneration agency (which was seen as a key funder of projects resulting from the research) became critical of the researcher and the 'biased' outlook being put forward by residents. This agency felt that the research was simply stirring up and magnifying unjustified hostility towards its role in the area. Other local agencies began to withdraw their support because they did not want to alienate the regeneration agency. No further projects were funded and once the research funding ended, residents were unable or unwilling to continue their activities through the forum.

Involving participants in a research project, especially perhaps when this is government-funded, can raise expectations which later prove not possible to meet. For example, local residents might see it as a longer-term commitment to change and improve their area. In the short term, such involvement may lead to real motivation and commitment among participants, instilling a self-belief in their capacity to bring about change. However, unless commitment and involvement is forthcoming from local agencies and interest groups, things may break down in the longer term, leading to disappointment and perhaps hostility to future programmes.

There are different degrees of community involvement in research studies. Some recent studies have tried to use local people as interviewers and in the design of research instruments. This raises a number of ethical and quality dilemmas that are not often considered in commissioning such studies. For example, if local people are interviewing others in the community, how does this compromise the confidentiality of responses, and does this impact on data quality? Response rates may also be affected if potential respondents are either reluctant to talk to local interviewers about the issues, or feel bound to participate.

Some research approaches include involving research participants as a central part of the work. This happens in a different way to that discussed above. For example, some researchers see it as central that their research helps to improve or change the lives of those they research. Furthermore, to improve the quality and reliability of their data where possible, those being researched are involved implicitly or explicitly in, for example, refining the research questions, influencing the data collection and commenting on the findings. Similar issues arise in relation to research on other groups, for example, businesses, who wish to ensure that research results are fully relevant to their concerns and presented in ways which are accessible to the participants. This creates fewer ethical dilemmas for the researchers who see involvement as part of conducting ethically-sound research. It does, however, create some challenges, for example, in the presentation of findings. For example, Birch and Miller (2002) conclude:

'If research participants are willing (and able) to take a full participatory role then researchers must develop different styles of writing that may challenge academic conventions but will reflect the co-production of research accounts. Such an enterprise depends upon the negotiation of an active research relationship where the exchange of ideas and understanding forms a rich seam that runs throughout the research.'

As with so many issues considered in this report, there is no simple answer in relation to whether or not to involve research participants in a study. Some researchers see this as essential. However, in other circumstances, for example, community involvement in evaluations of government initiatives, the situation might be different. It is important that those developing the study take into account a range of ethical and methodological issues to decide whether participant involvement in the research itself is really the most appropriate way of leading to change and local commitment.

Researcher involvement with respondents

A debate which relates to objectivity and quality in research, but also raises ethical issues, is how far researchers should become involved with, and perhaps try to help or change, their respondents' lives. There are different views on this. For some, conducting a study can not be separated from becoming involved and supporting participants. They recognise possible impacts on data quality and objectivity but would usually argue that involvement enriches rather than lessens the research. This argument is made particularly strongly by those involved in 'action research' and some types of policy-related research. Others maintain that for objective research to be conducted properly, researchers need to maintain a distance and should not get involved.

Opinions about whether researchers should become involved do depend on the nature and purpose of the research. For example, Fielding (2001) discusses researchers who become involved in drug dealing as part of their ethnography. This puts them in a difficult and illegal position. Although perhaps not undermining the actual findings, those reading these might look at them differently, if the researcher is not seen as an independent observer.

Another example in which researcher involvement may be seen as inappropriate is raised by Patton (2002). He discusses his involvement as a participant observer in a number of professional development programmes. Participants in the programme were expected to exercise increasing control over the curriculum as the programme developed. He did not feel it appropriate to influence the direction of the programme and so did not actively participate in these areas. Some might argue that his involvement might have enriched the development of the programme. However, he did not see this level of involvement as part of his role as evaluator. Thought needs to be given in advance to the role of the researcher

in the activities being researched, and whether involvement (as opposed to observation) could jeopardise the objectivity of a study, balancing this against the advantages of full participation.

Patton (2002) takes a more definite view, arguing that becoming involved is not acceptable. He states that the purpose of a research interview is to gather data, not to change people. It is common for interviewees to ask for advice, approval or confirmation, and in providing these the interviewer may answer more questions than they ask. In his view, it is important to stay focused on the purpose of the interview if high quality data is to be collected.

3.6 Ensuring that reporting and dissemination are carried out in a responsible manner

The general principle

The findings of research should be made widely available, and to a range of audiences. Those conducting the research have a responsibility to ensure that the findings of their study are made available and in a form suitable to the audiences aimed at. The commissioners of research must be prepared to make research findings available, even when the findings are unpalatable.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

What happens if publishing the findings could cause harm or distress to those researched or to other groups in society?

How can an academic or policy report be made accessible to wider audiences?

Dispute between the researcher and the client, or individual researchers, and their employers on the interpretation of the findings should be negotiated and not seen as sufficient cause for non-publication.

Discussion

There are a number of debates which relate to the issue of objectivity discussed above, but also many of the ethical issues discussed in relation to respondents. Roberts (1984) lists three reasons for making findings as widely available as possible:

- a responsibility to respondents
- for the credibility of social sciences, so that they become wider known and understood
- to reduce elitism, creating popularisation which can lead to pressure for change from below.

Making findings accessible

Two key issues discussed in much of the ethnographic literature, perhaps because of the close relationships developed with participants, are how to involve respondents in developing the findings and how to make the findings available to respondents. This is felt to improve the quality of the outputs. It also draws on ethical considerations relating to the involvement of participants in a study.

Skeggs (1994), researching young disadvantaged women, did copy her report to the respondents. This was written for an academic audience, and the women said they could not understand it. They were, however, proud to see their experiences and words in print.

If research is to become truly accessible, not just to respondents but also to other non-researchers, there does need to be emphasis on different styles of writing and different outlets. Birch and Miller (2002) conclude that if research is to be fully participatory, researchers need to develop different writing styles, which challenge academic conventions.

Researchers' right to publish

Related to making the findings of research more widely accessible is the researcher's right to publish. Ethical guidelines include statements specifying that researchers should try to retain the right to publish research results without hindrance. This is not always possible in certain types of applied research conducted for a client. However, concerns have arisen in some countries concerning government departments and agencies trying to suppress findings that are not palatable.

Sometimes researchers censor themselves, for example, after researching sensitive issues or vulnerable groups, due to concerns that publication or wide access to the findings may cause some harm to these respondents, or the communities of which they are a part (this is explored further in the section on harm to respondents). Another cause of self-censorship may be fear of offending powerful interest groups whose reputations or interests may be damaged by publication.

Related to the right to publish, and the potential for harm to be caused through the findings of research, is the extent of influence that researchers have over the use of their research. This is an ethical issue for researchers, perhaps more in that the users of research (in the widest sense, including the media) need to be made more aware of the ways in which research findings can be misinterpreted or taken out of context, and the potential harm this can cause to those researched.

Researchers have a right to publish. However, in doing this, they also need to be aware of the contributions of others. They need to acknowledge any debts they have to previous studies, whether in terms of knowledge, concepts or methodologies, and need to fully reference these.

When research has been carried out by a team, it is important to ensure that there is clear agreement amongst team members about how the work may be published and how individual contributions should be acknowledged. Where there has been disagreement amongst team members about the interpretation of research findings, it is particularly important to establish a form of acknowledgement which does not mis-represent the views of any individual.

3.7 Submitting methodology and findings for discussion and peer review

The general principle

Researchers should be open about the research methodology used and any theoretical underpinning, including any difficulties encountered when conducting a study. They should be prepared to submit this for peer review, along with the findings of their study.

There is also an ethical responsibility on those conducting a peer review to perform that function in an unbiased manner, based on professional expertise and knowledge, rather than their own particular political stance or as a means of scoring points. Related to this is the obligation on reviewers to declare a personal interest if the work under review is by a colleague or competitor, or by someone well known to them, with views which they are either strongly opposed to, or that are strongly similar to their own.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Where the reviewers substantially disagree with the methodology used or findings, this can sometimes be on political or ideological grounds, and be matters of interpretation. These types of disagreement are not sufficient to damn a piece of work, but should rather be used to stimulate debate on the issues.

3.8 Acknowledging previous research as a source of knowledge, data, concepts and methodology

The general principle

The intention should be to avoid representing the ideas of another researcher as one's own.

While some research studies are based around original ideas and lead to totally new findings, the majority are based on, and draw on, existing ideas and methodological approaches. In reporting a research study, the authors should fully acknowledge and reference the source of these.

Furthermore, the contribution of those who made a substantial contribution, whether as a researcher, sponsor or in a support capacity should be acknowledged in any publications.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

When ideas have been recycled through a range of publications, articles, *etc.,* it can sometimes be difficult to identify the originator of an idea.

Similar ideas can emerge from a number of different sources; where this is the case a range should be acknowledged.

4. Responsibilities to Research Participants

4.1 Introduction

The literature on research ethics focuses largely on the responsibilities of researchers towards those they research (variously known as 'respondents', 'research subjects' or 'research participants'). Existing ethical codes and guidelines all cover these issues, but vary in the extent to which they emphasise these areas compared to more general professional issues.

The overall themes derive very much from the Nuremberg and Helsinki codes, and are those enshrined in human rights legislation. They also form the basis of all biomedical and health research codes of practice. In particular, good ethical practice in socio-economic research involves: voluntary participation; informed consent; that no harm should come to respondents, and that their interests should be protected, alongside their privacy; and confidentiality and anonymity. Each of these is considered separately below, although many of these separate issues are closely inter-related. The literature and various existing guidelines also raise a number of other issues around the dissemination of the findings of research, and researching sensitive issues and vulnerable groups. These are also discussed.

As discussed in the introduction, conducting ethical research is not necessarily easy. Researchers have to make difficult decisions and address complex ethical dilemmas. These may emerge before, during, or after a research project is completed. There are general overriding principles, in particular relating to human dignity and the treatment of people with respect. However, as will be illustrated in the rest of this chapter, there is not always an easy answer, or indeed a single answer, to many ethical questions. The approach taken will depend on the perspectives of a particular researcher or research team, and the context of the research. What is important is that decisions are based on an informed approach, and are made as the result of conscious deliberation and justification, rather than an *ad hoc* or 'knee jerk' reaction.

In addition to dilemmas relating to each of the individual themes discussed below, there can also be conflicts or dilemmas between generally-held beliefs and other decisions involved in the research process. For example, while there is a growing consensus that

good quality research is synonymous with ethically-sound research, the use of certain methodological approaches can create dilemmas in relation to various ethical principles.

The basic principles addressed in this chapter are:

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that participation in research should be voluntary.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that decisions about participation in research are made from an informed position.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that all data are treated with appropriate confidentiality and anonymity.

- Researchers should endeavour to ensure that research participants are protected from undue intrusion, distress, indignity, physical discomfort, personal embarrassment, or psychological or other harm.

4.2 Voluntary participation in research

The general principle

All potential research subjects should be given the opportunity to refuse to participate in the research. They should not feel that they are being coerced into participation through deceit or through being put under undue distress. They should be aware that they are entitled to refuse to answer particular questions and to withdraw completely at any stage in the study. An exception to this principle is when the data to be collected are required by law (such as census or electoral registration data).

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

Even when participation is required by law, what sorts of limitations should be put on the secondary analyses or uses of such data?

When does persuading someone to respond put them under undue distress? Can researchers be made more aware of the reactions of potential respondents, identifying when they are pushing too hard?

How should relationships with gatekeepers (who protect access to particular respondents — for example, children, people with disabilities and elderly people) be managed? Can permission from the gatekeeper be adequately considerate of the needs of, and potential for harm to, vulnerable respondents?

When proxy or mediated interviews are conducted for a survey, how can care be taken not to infringe the 'private space' of the

person about whom questions are asked, or to avoid disturbing the relationship between them and the respondent?

Discussion

The importance of voluntary participation

Voluntary participation in research is a basic human right and overlaps considerably with informed consent. Both are considered separately here, as some different issues do emerge.

The right to voluntary participation in research is enshrined in the Nuremberg Code:

> *'The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential. This means that a person involved should have the legal capacity to give consent; should be so situated as to be able to exercise free power of choice, without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, over-reaching, or other ulterior form of constraint or coercion…'*

Voluntary participation is seen as very important for the reputation and quality of socio-economic research. Researchers want to respect the rights of individuals and many come from a theoretical or philosophical perspective in which individual rights are seen as central. Forcing or pushing people too hard to participate in a research interview may alienate them and discourage them from future participation (see Hedges, in Windle, 1996). This impacts on the quality of research. For example, people coerced into participating may give inaccurate or unhelpful answers, while alienating potential respondents can harm the ability of researchers to obtain sound samples, or collect the views of particular groups. Concern about declining response rates in Britain was the reason behind the study conducted by Windle (1996).

Voluntary participation is not uncontroversial

Although voluntary participation might seem to be a clear and uncontroversial issue, this is not always the case. De Vaus (2002) identifies three situations in survey research in which voluntary participation is not the case:

- Surveys in which governments require people by law to participate: Censuses are the main example here, although potential respondents can still adopt strategies which get round this compulsion, for example, by not returning a form, never being available to the interviewer. Nevertheless, response rates are still usually very high in most countries.

- Institutions which require clients, students, patients, businesses, those in receipt of benefits, etc. to complete forms: Although not strictly surveys, these administrative data may be used for monitoring, planning or reporting. In some cases, these people

may refuse to participate by not completing the form or providing the information sought, except where this means a service is withdrawn.

- Students who are required to participate in a survey or experiment as part of the requirements of their course.

To this list can be added data which are collected more surreptitiously as a by-product of transactions, such as online purchases or bookings, or registration for subscriptions to newsletters.

There are also a number of other situations or research methodologies in which the principle of voluntary participation is, or may be, contravened. In some cases, researchers do not consider the issue of whether respondents have voluntarily agreed to participate or not. A strategy or approach is adopted which is widely seen as acceptable, or which is the only one possible to explore a particular issue and the necessary measures to obtain interviews are taken. In more recent years, there appears to be a greater consciousness in the literature on research ethics about these issues.

Pushing potential respondents too hard

One issue is how far interviewers push potential respondents to participate and at what point this contravenes voluntary participation. There are differences between qualitative and quantitative interviewing, in particular in relation to how far the interviewer feels involved in, or 'owns', the research. In survey research, field interviewers often have quotas to meet in the number of interviews they conduct and the type of respondent they are required to recruit. They have to decide how hard to push to achieve an interview (Dale *et al.*, 1998) and may be tempted to push people harder than may be deemed acceptable. Ethical guidelines can highlight the dilemmas and provide guidance, but ultimately interviewers have to rely on their own judgement. The employer of field interviewers has a role here, through not placing requirements in terms of, for example, the number of interviews to be conducted in a day, which are so onerous that these interviewers feel they have to push hard or adopt under hand techniques to meet their quotas.

Much of the literature on qualitative interviewing suggests that the interviewer has greater knowledge of the project and is more likely to have some ownership, hence, issues of voluntary participation are different; this is not necessarily the case. Having personal ownership may make a researcher push people harder, or use a range of techniques to persuade people to participate so that they feel unable to say 'no'. Many writers on ethnographic research discuss the issue of power in the relationship between researcher and those they research. An ethnographic study by definition involves the researcher becoming deeply involved with the people being studied (their points relate to overt research;

issues of covert research are discussed below). The relationships of trust which build up can make it easier for the researcher to gain access to information and interviews. Researchers need to be conscious of how far they are exploiting that relationship, whether it contravenes voluntary participation and, if it does, the consequences of this.

The role of gatekeepers

Studies of some groups do not just involve direct contact with, and consent to participate from, the individuals being researched. Indeed, the latter stage may be missed out or taken for granted. For example, interviewing employees in an organisation, elderly people in care homes, patients in hospitals, and children, all involve going through one (and often more) intermediaries or gate-keepers, before any access is gained to potential respondents. This raises some key issues of voluntary participation and informed consent (the latter is further discussed in the next section).

In many circumstances, once permission is obtained to conduct the research from the gatekeeper(s), it is often assumed that this means the individual respondents aimed at have also consented. For example, in relation to research with children, Morrow and Richards (1996) report:

> 'In the UK, consent is usually taken to mean consent from parents or those "in loco parentis", and in this respect children are to a large extent seen as their parents' property, devoid of the right to say "no" to research. In practice, researchers usually obtain consent from a wide range of adult gatekeepers (parents, school teachers, head teachers, school governors, local educational authority officers and so on in the case of school-based research) before they are allowed anywhere near the children, and may feel unwilling to jeopardise their research project by asking the children explicitly for their "informed consent".'

Similarly with elderly people and people with learning difficulties, it is often assumed that obtaining consent from a carer is enough (see, for example, Fisk and Wigley, 2000; Magnusson *et al.*, 2001).

More recently there has been a shift in the debates about the nature of what is seen as an acceptable ethical decision. More emphasis is placed on the right of the individual being researched to consent, or not, to participation, and the role of the gatekeeper has been down played. This means that gaining access to, and consent from, particular groups of respondents becomes more complex and the nature of ethical dilemmas changes.

Using the example of children again, David *et al.* (2001) conducted research on children through schools. Having negotiated access through the various gatekeepers, they wanted the children themselves to agree to participate in the study. Although their article is about informed consent, it does raise issues of what is meant by voluntary participation. The children were informed

about the research through leaflets and classroom activities, in order to give them the choice about whether to participate. However, they are accustomed to an educational approach which does not effectively offer them the option of participating or not. Furthermore, the researchers were identified as figures of authority in the educational environment. It was not clear to the researchers how far participation was really voluntary.

In studies of elderly people with dementia, and people with learning difficulties, there is a move towards gaining consent from the individuals themselves (see, for example, Dewing, 2002; Fisk and Wigley, 2000). It has often been assumed that people who are cognitively impaired in some way are unable to understand and consent to participation in research. However, this has been challenged by more recent studies. Different techniques have to be adopted in gaining consent through, for example, the use of non-verbal language and being very aware of respondents' reactions throughout an interview. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that carers are not always in the best position to anticipate or interpret people's keenness to engage in, and express their own opinions through, research studies. The researcher will face a challenge if the gatekeeper is not keen, but those they are protecting do want to participate.

These debates also apply to organisational research, for example that conducted with employers. Researchers wishing to gain access to employees have to negotiate this through those in managerial positions. However, it can then be assumed that the fact that organisational permission has been granted, means that employees automatically agree. Care needs to be taken that the employees have themselves agreed to participate and are informed about the research study.

Guidelines on interviewing minors, issued by the Arbeitskreis Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute, discuss whether a young person can give consent in relation to their 'cognitive faculty':

> 'Thus the decisive issue is whether minors are able to comprehend the consequences of their data being used, and to express an opinion accordingly.'

> 'If minors are capable of such comprehension, then their legal representatives (as a rule their parents) do not need to give their consent. In the absence of this cognitive facility, it is essential to obtain the consent of a legal representative — though not in writing.'

> 'Children under the age of 11 must be assumed in principle not to have this cognitive facility …. When interviewing children between the ages of 11 and 13 it is the responsibility of the agency conducting the research either to have the interviewers employed determine the child's cognitive facility, or … to assume in general that this age group too does not possess such cognitive faculties and that the consent of a guardian is therefore required.'

Proxy and indirect responses

These relate particularly to survey research and there is little discussion in the literature. Some surveys in which more than one or all household members are interviewed allow, possibly even rely on, proxy responses. While this raises a number of methodological issues in relation to data quality, it also raises ethical issues. Has permission been sought from those for whom proxy responses are sought? Do they understand the nature of the survey and the types of response the proxy respondent might give?

The Social Research Association (2003) ethical guidelines do address proxy responses specifying that care should be taken not to infringe the 'private space' of the person about whom questions are being asked, or to disturb the relationship between them and the proxy.

De Vaus (2002) talks about 'indirect participation' of people in research and provides a number of illustrations. A questionnaire that asks about the income, education and occupation of a respondent's partner or parents means that these people are participating involuntarily, and can also be an invasion of their privacy. His second example is of parents as involuntary participants when children are asked about parental behaviour.

Covert research

There is a large literature on covert research and the issues of voluntarily participation and informed consent. By definition, if research is covert, respondents don't know it is happening and hence are unable to decide whether to participate or not. Opinion ranges from those who think covert research is never justified, to those who think it is justified in particular circumstances. This is explored in more detail in the next section, on informed consent.

Those who think covert research is acceptable justify this in a number of ways. They report that the data and the understanding of particular groups or social processes these generate are important and necessary, and that these data and understanding could not be generated in any other way. Sapsford and Abbott (1996) comment that it may be less reactive to research people's lives unobtrusively through covert methods. Furthermore, these methods may be less likely to cause harm, for example, if potential respondents feel distress or anxiety at the thought of being studied. Where the researcher joins in and becomes part of a group or community, it can also be argued that covert research will provide more honest and accurate information compared, for example, to conducting formal/structured interviews with the same respondents. Many examples of covert research involve studies of violent, criminal or anti-social groups, those involved in non-accepted behaviours, or where a group has closed membership.

At the other extreme, those against covert research argue that it is never acceptable to conduct research on people without their consent. Sapsford and Abbott (1996) comment that: '… another way of putting the term "unobtrusive measures" is ''spying on people without their knowledge and consent''. '. It is argued that valid and reliable data can be obtained through operating in a covert manner, gaining the trust and participation of potential respondents.

A danger in covert research which is conducted without consent from participants is that it brings controversy to the findings. Individuals or organisations might withdraw from participation in any research. For example, psychologists researching the diagnosis made in a mental hospital sent in people pretending to be patients. This research showed a very high level of mis-diagnosis of mental illness. Furthermore, although other patients recognised those pretending, doctors did not (Rosenhan, 1973). These findings, although important, did alienate a number of hospitals from being involved in research. On one hand, it could be argued that it was only possible to draw accurate findings using a covert methodology. On the other, it does appear that little consideration was given to alternatives or the ethical (and other) implications of a covert study.

Mystery shopping is another form of covert research. Existing guidance specifies that those subject to such research should be notified in advance that such research is planned. This is not always possible, as notifying those affected in advance is likely to lead to changes in their behaviour. For example, if a study exploring discrimination in the recruitment process involved researchers posing as applicants, informing the recruiters in advance may lead to their acting differently to normal.

Other types of covert research, for example, observational research and taking photographs or videoing for research purposes, raise further ethical issues. In particular, these relate to the difference between public and private space. It is argued that people expect to be observed, possibly photographed, in public spaces, so it is ethical to conduct research, or at least ethical concerns are lessened. However, others would argue that although people might expect to be observed in public spaces, they do not necessarily expect to be researched. It is the expectations of 'participants' which is argued to be very important in these situations.

Another issue raised relates to the identity of public and private space. Although at first sight this would seem to be clear, a closer look shows that there are grey areas. Again, people's expectations should enter into the decision-making process about whether it is ethical to observe people in different situations.

The Internet raises wider issue about voluntary participation, and whether people expect to be observed, or for the information they place on the Internet (whether through emails, chat rooms, bulletin boards, *etc.*). The AoIR guidelines (Ess, 2002) discuss public and private space, and whether people are operating in arenas in which they think their communication, or such like, is being observed or recorded by researchers. Again, the categorising of public and private space is not necessarily clear cut. For example, although most chat rooms are open to everyone who comes across them, those participating in one may not have the perception that they are in a public area. One particular example was that of an area in which people who had been abused were sharing experiences. Although this was a public area, it was not widely known about, and was felt by the participants to be an area in which they could express themselves freely to others with similar experiences. A researcher used the data without asking permission, and in doing so highlighted the existence of this chat area. While not strictly a private space, the researcher should have thought through the consequences of publishing details about, and naming, this site.

4.3 Participation from an informed position

The general principle

For respondents to make informed decisions about participating in a study requires that they are provided with accurate information. Even if participation is required by law, participants should be given as much information as possible about the requirements of their participation and the extent of the data sought.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

How much information should be given to help participants decide whether they will participate or not? How much information can be given without excessively 'leading' respondents? How much technical detail about a study can respondents be expected to comprehend? What constitutes essential information? How available should researchers be to answer further questions from participants?

When should the information be provided and consent obtained? Should information be provided and consent obtained some time before the required response or interview — to allow the respondent some thinking time? Or should it be dealt with immediately proceeding the seeking of responses? If a study is conducted in several parts, should this process be gone through prior to each response episode? Might excessive advance information prejudice the outcome of the study? How much debriefing (and of what nature) should be offered afterwards?

Should a signed consent form be used?

Is deception ever acceptable? Are there any situations in which information should be withheld because it might affect a respondent's willingness to participate — such as to increase response rates? It if is only possible to obtain information through covert research (for example, studies of violent, criminal or subversive groups, or of fraudulent or discriminatory practices) how can the researcher balance the need for deception against the value to society of conducting the research? How can the researcher make it clear that collecting the information is necessary and that covert methods are the only means of doing this?

Discussion

Informed consent is very closely related to the concept of voluntary participation. It is also considered a basic human right and is enshrined in the Nuremberg Code:

> '… the person involved … should have sufficient knowledge and comprehension of the elements of the subject matter involved as to enable him to make an understanding and enlightened decision. This latter element requires that before the acceptance of an affirmative decision by the experimental subject there should be made known to him the nature, duration and purpose of the experiment; the method and means by which it is to be conducted; all inconveniences and hazards reasonable to be expected; and the effects upon his health or person which may possibly come from his participation in the experiment.'

Informed consent is one of the key ethical issues discussed in all the literature on research ethics and covered by existing codes and guidelines. These highlight a number of dilemmas and controversies in obtaining informed consent. Again, the fact that ethical decisions are not always easy or clear cut is emphasised.

What is informed consent?

Informed consent implies that participants in research make a decision which is based on full and accurate information. Many authors list what information should be provided (for example, De Vaus (2002), Patton (2002), *etc.*). The list is potentially long and includes:

- the purpose of the study

- the identity of the researcher, research organisation and sponsor

- an assurance of anonymity and/or confidentiality

- an assurance that participation is voluntary and that the respondent is free to withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question

- the benefits of the study

- any foreseeable risks or embarrassment associated with participating in the study

- information on how the respondent was selected for the study

- information on the way in which the data collected will be used

- an offer to answer any questions

- whether the data will be archived and possible future uses (this is an issue which has been debated most recently).

A balance has to be made between how much to tell a potential respondent, their ability to comprehend and take in all this information, and the impact of more or less information on their propensity to respond, and data quality.

Providing full information, or too much information, does not necessarily mean that a respondent will be properly informed. Hedges (in Windle, 1996) found that non-participants in research felt they were given too much information or that the information was not explicit enough. Their responses suggest that if they had been given accurate information, they had not taken it all in — for example, they were concerned about confidentiality and anonymity, what happened to the questionnaires and the nature of the questions asked. Singer (1993) found that providing detailed, truthful information before a telephone survey had little effect on either overall or 'item' non-response.

Some of the items listed above, which it is felt should be included in obtaining informed consent, are alien concepts to potential respondents or may cause some concern. For example, the concept of archiving data for re-use by other researchers may raise real concerns in the minds of some respondents. For them to fully understand the implications of this could take considerable explanation, or indeed be beyond the capacity of some survey interviewers to provide all the answers.

There are other items on which it will be impossible to provide much detailed information. For example, it would be impossible for interviewers on large-scale government surveys to describe all the uses to which the data may be put. In such cases, it may be desirable to make a general statement. As Dale *et al.* (1988) point out, it would be impossible for interviewers to reassure pensioners that the income information would not be used to justify a pension cut or promise mothers that a means tested child benefit would not be introduced as a result of the findings.

Providing too much information on the content and aim of a study could compromise the outcomes (Gilbert, 2002). Bulmer (2001) argues that there are many situations in which it is not possible to be completely open to all participants, and that it is recognised that degrees of openness and concealment are possible in social research.

When to give the information and obtain consent

Traditionally, it has been accepted practice to obtain informed consent from respondents at the beginning of a study. However, there is a growing awareness that this might not be sufficient. Various researchers have argued that informed consent can only really be given at the end of an interview, when the full nature of the study is known to, and understood by, a respondent; that in some situations (*eg* ethnographic studies) the nature of the research and the emerging data may only become fully apparent as the study progresses; and that respondents may change their mind about participation (as an individual interview or an overall study progresses).

These arguments are not just made in relation to qualitative research. For example, De Vaus (2002) comments that survey respondents often have little idea what they have consented to until after the interview. Obtaining informed consent only at the beginning is therefore not enough. This does, however, open up a major practical issue. Respondents naturally want to know something about a study before they participate. If they are then asked at the end whether they give their consent for the interview to be included in the survey, this could well increase interviewer time (and survey costs) if respondents decide to withdraw their interview at this stage. Furthermore, certain types of respondent or respondents with particular types of views or experience may be more likely to withdraw, leading to problems of representativeness.

Birch *et al.* (2002) argue that as researchers:

> '… we identify knowledge production as being grounded in individual and collective experiences and this means that the course of a project may only be guessed at initially. While informing participants about the research aims at the outset of a project is vital, final research findings may not resonate with those aims. The precise nature of "consent" for the participants might only become clear eventually, at the end of the study, when the researchers' impact on shaping the study is visible. This raises questions about what it is that the participant is consenting to. Just "participation" in the sense of being interviewed?'

Hornsby-Smith (1993) concludes that obtaining consent should be regarded:

> '… not as a once-and-for-all prior event, but as a process, subject to negotiation over time.'

Who gives consent?

This issue was discussed in relation to voluntary participation. It is often assumed that some types of research participant, for example, people with learning difficulties, children and elderly people with dementia, are unable to provide informed consent

themselves and that it is adequate to obtain consent from their carer (whether an individual or organisation).

This is beginning to change. For example, work with children and people with dementia (Dewing, 2002; David *et al.*, 2001) challenges the idea that they are unable to consent to participating in research. Different mechanisms for explaining about the study need to be adopted in addressing these groups. Researchers have found that children and people with dementia are as capable of providing informed consent, perhaps more so, than their carers. A group of researchers in Scotland are beginning to develop guidelines relating to obtaining informed consent from people with dementia.

The idea that informed consent is on-going throughout a research project is emphasised in this literature. Although not perhaps able to demonstrate a wish to withdraw in the same way as other adults, people with dementia and learning difficulties are able to indicate this in other ways. Researchers have to become more aware of body language and other non-verbal reactions in assessing whether someone wishes to continue participating in an interview.

A researcher conducting a study in a home for elderly people had to negotiate access through the staff. It was then assumed that the residents had consented to participate. This created difficulties for the researcher who felt she was intruding on residents' personal space and that they did not understand why she was there. Some residents adopted ways of resisting becoming involved in something over which they felt they had no influence — for example, by falling asleep, wandering off, or refusing to talk. These were seen as informal means of withholding consent.

The role of signed consent forms

On one hand, it can be argued that to properly obtain informed consent, respondents need to sign a form to say that they understand the research, its uses, *etc.* and agree to participate. Others see this as unnecessary. Furthermore, the legal status of signed consent forms is unclear. While they do have some status in a court of law if a respondent later disputes something, exactly how far they are legally binding documents is unclear. Alderson (1996) reports that a signed consent form does not provide sufficient evidence to convince a court of law that informed and freely-given consent was obtained. She concludes that the main purpose of the form is to:

> *'… help to ensure that minimal standards are observed, and also to transfer responsibility for risks which have been explained from the researcher to the subject.'*

There is varying evidence on the advantages or otherwise of obtaining signed consent. Miller and Bell (2002) report that individuals who are socially excluded or belonging to a

marginalised group are unlikely to consent in writing to participation in a study. Some groups are suspicious of signing forms due to concerns that the information might fall into the hands of the wrong people (Fielding, 2001). Furthermore, signing a form may be seen as contradicting assurances of anonymity and/or confidentiality.

In various qualitative methodologies, asking a respondent to sign a form can also damage the rapport which is beginning to build up as a researcher negotiates access.

There is some evidence that signing a consent form reduces response rates. For example, Singer (1993) found that providing detailed information about a survey before participation had little effect on overall or 'item response' rates. However, when respondents were asked to sign an informed consent form, the response rate dropped by seven per cent, and this was regardless of whether the form was signed before or after the interview. Furthermore, respondents who signed the consent form before the interview reported lower levels of socially undesirable behaviour compared to those asked to sign after the interview.

These findings do raise issues about the desirability of obtaining evidence of informed consent in writing. There does not appear to be any evidence that signing a form means that a respondent is more likely to have taken in, and understood, information given to them about the survey. However, obtaining signed consent does appear to compromise the accuracy of the data collected. These have to be balanced against each other when considering whether or not to use signed consent forms.

There is one situation in which signed consent is necessary, and that is in the case of recorded qualitative interviews. Under data protection law, the words used by respondents are their copyright. If these are to be transcribed and used as quotations, permission has to be sought from the respondent.

Is deception ever acceptable?

Bulmer (2001) was reported earlier in this section to conclude that degrees of openness and concealment are possible in social research. There are varying debates about whether deception is ever acceptable and the conclusion varies depending on the methodological, philosophical and moral stance taken by individual researchers, or groups of researchers.

Researchers who have adopted deception (typically in covert research) usually offer an ethical justification and have sometimes agonised over the issues. Some who initially saw no problem with this approach subsequently changed their minds. There must be others who have not considered the ethical implications of their actions in any depth. As with so many ethical considerations,

those who see deception as being acceptable usually justify this in terms of a balance between the needs for the data and the potential harm of overt approaches. For example, Punch (1986) concludes:

> 'Some measure of deception is acceptable in some areas where the benefits of knowledge outweigh the benefits of harm and where the harms have been minimised by following convention on confidentiality and identity.'

There remains an issue of who decides how important it is to obtain the knowledge in question. In some cases, the justification is based just on academic arguments relating to the importance of any knowledge. Other arguments are based on the need for understanding to help support some groups or address the harm caused by others.

Others would disagree with Punch. For example, Holland and Ramazanaglou (1994) report that many researchers would blanch at his approach. They (and many others) talk about the need for openness on the part of the interviewer about all aspects of a study. The reciprocity of the relationship between researcher and researched is emphasised, and how this leads to fuller, more accurate data. However, ethnographers researching violent people or groups which exhibit some sort of deviant behaviour find it difficult, if not impossible, to develop reciprocal relationships with their respondents. In such studies, deception is almost always the only way of obtaining data.

According to Sieber (1982), there are four situations in which deception is justified:

- to achieve stimulus control or random assignment of subjects

- to study responses to low frequency events

- to obtain valid data without serious risk to subjects (for example, research on conflict using an accomplice who ensures that violence does not escalate beyond an agreed point)

- to obtain information which would otherwise not be gained because of defensiveness, shame, embarrassment, or fear of reprisal.

Psychologists may need to use deception when conducting experimental research. However, the Spanish *Code of Ethics for the Psychologist* states:

> 'When research requires the psychologist to resort to deception or tricks, he or she must ensure that this will not cause long term harm to any of the subjects and must always inform them of the nature and experimental need for the deception at the end of the session or research.'

Homan used covert ethnographic methods to observe the practices of Pentecostalists. The covert nature of his study was due

to the unwillingness of those present to be studied. Some social researchers are concerned that the requirement to obtain informed consent could produce a situation which systematically excludes certain groups from scrutiny. The need to research some such groups, except in the pursuit of knowledge, could be questioned. Lee (2000) argues that Homan seems to come close to saying that the wishes of potential respondents can always be overridden for the purposes of research.

Some researchers or researchers using a particular approach adopt a range of mechanisms to deal with issues of informed consent. For example, if mystery shopping is to be used, those affected will be informed that there are mystery shoppers around, or that they will be around at some point. This does, however, change the nature of the subject being studied. For example, an evaluation of the quality of service provided by the British Employment Service was conducted using a mystery shopping technique (Lopata, 2001). Those offices involved were notified in advance and the exercise created an element of competition between them. This did, however, mean that the situation being researched was not the norm. A delegate at a conference run by the SPA/BSA (November 2002) reported that in his covert research he told respondents that he might be observing or collecting data from them at some point, but not when.

Others inform research participants after the event. For example, in a notorious psychological experiment, respondents were deliberately deceived, as it was felt that accurate information would compromise the study (Milgram, 1965). Although participants were fully debriefed after the study, critics argued that the emotional damage had already been done and was not easily repaired, and that damage to the reputation of socio-economic research could not easily be recouped.

A number of other guidelines comment explicitly on covert research. For example, the British Sociological Association ethical guidelines state:

> *'There are serious ethical dangers in the use of covert research but covert methods may avoid certain problems. For instance, difficulties arise when research participants change their behaviours because they know they are being studied. Researchers may also face problems when access to spheres of social life is closed to social scientists by powerful or secretive interests.*
>
> *However, covert methods violate the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied. Participant or non-participant observation in non-public spaces or experimental manipulation of research participants without their knowledge should be resorted to only where it is impossible to use other methods to obtain essential data.*

In such studies it is important to safeguard the anonymity of research participants. Ideally where informed consent has not been obtained prior to the research is should be obtain post-hoc.'

The International Sociological Association *Code of Ethics* state:

'The consent of research subjects and informants should be obtained in advance. Covert research should be avoided in principle, unless it is the only method by which information can be gathered, and/or when access to the usual sources of information is obstructed by those in power.'

4.4 Treating data with appropriate confidentiality and anonymity

The general principle

The principles of data confidentiality and anonymity should be clarified as part of gaining the participants' informed consent. This should be agreed and understood between all parties at the beginning of a research project. This must include adherence to the legal requirements provided in the RESPECT reports on data protection and intellectual property rights.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

To what extent can confidentiality and anonymity be guaranteed?

What happens when respondents want to be named?

What should be done when information is uncovered that should be revealed, for example, where a company is defrauding the public, where criminal activity is taking place or when the respondent is a danger to themselves or others? If issues of confidentiality may be over-ridden for legal reasons and/or reasons of conscience, how is the researcher to reach such a decision?

When researchers are subpoenaed to name respondents in Court, for example, where illegal activities are being carried out, on what grounds might they refuse to reveal the information? What legal and what ethical consequences might they then have to face?

Discussion

Although the terms 'anonymity' and 'confidentiality' are often used interchangeably, they do have different definitions which are important. Anonymity means that respondents cannot be identified (including by the researcher). Confidentiality means that participants can be identified by the researcher but access to this will not go beyond this researcher and names will not be revealed in any context. Assurances of confidentiality are nearly always given in research, although, as will be discussed below, questions are being asked about the need for this in all circumstances.

Anonymity is relevant in certain situations — for example, survey data, is usually anonymised when it is archived or given to others to use, to ensure confidentiality is maintained. In some qualitative studies, it is argued that assurances of anonymity are important, *eg* to help with responses to studies of sensitive issues and to protect vulnerable groups. If respondents are likely to suspect assurances of anonymity, it may be better to seek only confidentiality. For example, Singer *et al.* (1995) concludes that on sensitive matters, such as drug use and sexual behaviour, people are more likely to respond if given strong assurances of confidentiality. Aitkin (2001) stresses the importance of anonymity in family research exploring sensitive issues.

There are a number of reasons why confidentiality and/or anonymity are important. Firstly, the right to this is a basic human right (although as mentioned above and discussed further below, confidentiality is not always wanted by respondents). There are also other methodological reasons:

- to improve the quality and honesty of responses, especially on sensitive issues

- to encourage participation in the study and improve representativeness of the sample

- to protect respondents' privacy (and possibly protect them from harm — for example, if a client wants to know about people whose responses suggested particular views or behaviours)

- to protect informants from discrimination or other adverse consequences of disclosure, for example, employees reporting on poor working conditions who might be sacked by the employer if their identities could be discerned.

Confidentiality and anonymity do not just apply to the publication and dissemination of findings, or releasing data to other researchers. Consideration also needs to be given to the interviewing situation. For example, Valentine (2001) discusses the need to interview household members separately in a qualitative study. Having several household members present can be disruptive, but more importantly from an ethical point of view, some respondents may feel unable to respond (accurately or sometimes at all) if others are present. Similarly, in organisational research, it is important to consider the need to interview employees separately, and sometimes without the knowledge of their colleagues or managers.

Respondents who want to be named

There is growing evidence that confidentiality is not always appropriate in socio-economic research. This does not mean that it should still not normally be the case, but rather, that the need to give guarantees of confidentiality should not necessarily be taken

as given. The growth of user involvement in research perhaps emphasises this issue, although a number of other researchers have discussed how their respondents could not see a need for confidentiality, and indeed were proud of seeing their names in print. Changes in other areas, for example, the growth of reality television, involving what are sometimes very intrusive programmes, might also influence the attitudes of some groups.

Most recently, Grinyer (2002) has discussed these issues. She puts forward the view that concerns about anonymity/confidentiality have led to 'a culturally embedded assumption than anonymity is an ethical prerequisite', particularly in researching sensitive issues.

She discusses her experience on a project interviewing parents of young adults with cancer. This study collected narratives of their experiences. Respondents were given explicit assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, and pseudonyms were allocated. As the interviews progressed, the researchers began to feel that this was not appropriate. They wrote to all participants and around three-quarters replied saying they would like their own names to be used. Another respondent changed her mind about wanting her identity to be protected by a pseudonym when she saw the published article. Grinyer comments:

> 'The balance of protecting respondents from harm by hiding their identity while at the same time preventing "loss of ownership" is an issue that needs to be addressed by each researcher on an individual basis with each respondent.'

Furthermore, this example illustrates the need to review issues of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the project, not just make assurances to respondents at the outset. For example, the respondent who changed her mind in Grinyer's study did so after seeing the research in print. If respondents are more closely involved in different stages of a study, they can make informed decisions themselves on a range of ethical issues, rather than these being purely up to, and imposed by, the researcher. Grinyer concludes:

> ' … if researchers are aware of the issues and consult with respondents as fully as possible throughout the research and publication process, there will be less chance of research participants feeling that they have lost ownership of their stories. There is after all an ethical dimension to a researcher deciding on behalf of respondents that their identity should be concealed without verifying the respondents' wishes.'

Respondents wanting to be identified is not necessarily new, and has been raised by other researchers. For example, Skeggs (1994), in an ethnographic study of disadvantaged young women, showed her findings to the participants. Pseudonyms had been used but they would have preferred to have had their own names used. Although they were often reporting quite disturbing situations, participating in the research gave them a sense of self-

worth. They could not believe that they were interesting enough to be studied.

Kobayashi (2001), in several qualitative studies among different groups, also found that some respondents would have liked to be named. This does raise the ethical dilemma of whether and how to distinguish between those for whom pseudonyms are used, and those who want to be named, in research reports.

Situations in which confidentiality may be infringed after the event

In some circumstances, researchers may have no option about whether to infringe confidentiality assurances or not; in others there can be a dilemma about what to do with certain types of information revealed.

Researchers may have no option about whether to infringe confidentiality assurances in situations covered by law. For example, it is a legal requirement to report suspicions of child abuse. This can still put a researcher in an ethically difficult situation. Social workers, and others, who are trained to spot abuse do not always get it right. A researcher, however close to the situation, is likely to find it more difficult. How sure should someone be that abuse is taking place before it is reported, and what are the signs which need to be looked for? A similar situation might arise in relation to suspicions of fraudulent activity by a company or abuse of power by a government official. Researchers will have to balance their concerns about getting it wrong, and damaging a situation in which they have gained a position of trust, against letting an illegal relationship continue.

Researchers who suspect a research participant will cause harm to themselves or others have to make a judgement about whether to report this. For example, Ritchie (1986) reports a situation where she had to decide whether to disclose the name of a suicidal respondent so that social workers could provide help. Medical ethics provide strong guidance on this area, but it is not clear whether the same conditions should be imposed on socio-economic researchers.

Another area of ethical dilemma in relation to confidentiality occurs when researchers are studying violent behaviour, or groups exhibiting what are regarded as deviant behaviours (*eg* drug abuse, assault, burglary, football hooliganism). Calvey (2000) discusses this in relation to his ethnographic research with bouncers. During the course of his work he witnessed criminal events, such as assault, drug taking, theft and withholding information from the police. He was putting himself in a situation which conflicted with his personal ethics. Some things he was able to deal with — for example, by refusing drugs — but as he became more involved in the study he had to think about the position he was in legally.

In some countries, research data does not enjoy legal privilege and researchers can be subpoenaed. This is discussed by Feenan (2002) when reporting his research on paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland. There is no case law in the United Kingdom relating to this issue and researchers have refused to appear in Court. Being in the situation of being asked to give evidence in Court puts researchers in a difficult ethical position. They do not want to condone criminal activity, but also do not want to compromise assurances made to respondents. Furthermore, if disclosure is made and this becomes public, this can cause problems for establishing trust amongst other, and possible future, participants in a study. This could potentially compromise the findings of, and conclusions drawn from, a study.

Another situation in which a researcher may be in a difficult position is when pressure from a client is exerted to find out about things they are not happy with and want to stop. This is where ethical guidelines can be very useful. Researchers can resort to these to emphasise the ethics of confidentiality assurances in research. Researchers may, however, still be put in a personally difficult position. For example, if they have not been paid for the work, payment may be withheld, and the chances of future work may be jeopardised.

Internet research

Internet research raises a number of ethical issues in relation to confidentiality. The boundaries are also perhaps less clear. For example, Sharp (1999) points out that emails can be instant-aneously copied or redirected to others (often unknown to the writer). Furthermore, although computer-aided communication is a very public medium, most people chatting about a topic on the Internet do not consider the possibility that a researcher is gathering their conversations as data.

The distinction between private and public space is less clear. This makes the confidentiality and anonymity of data more complex. The debates centre on participants' expectations; however, it may be more difficult to identify the expectations of those using the Internet. It might be argued that if people who post messages or participate in discussions do so under their own name, a researcher is not bound to use these data confidentially. However, it will not occur to most of these people that the information they email or place on a discussion site will be used for research purposes; this use of such data does therefore raise ethical issues.

Mann and Stewart (2000) discuss ethical issues in relation to Internet research. They conclude that researchers can make assurances of confidentiality in relation to the ways that they will use the data. They cannot, however, promise that data provided through electronic communication will not be accessed and used by others. This means that Internet researchers always need to be

thinking carefully about the confidentiality assurances they can give participants.

There are situations in which researchers may not know that the confidentiality and anonymity of the data they are collecting is being infringed. For example, in an online discussion relating to criminal activity, a law organisation might 'tap' the line. The researchers may then find themselves open to subpoena and being pressured to disclose participants' identities, if these are have not already been accessed by the authorities (Mann and Stewart, 2000).

Anonymising and keeping data confidential

There are many ways in which data can be anonymised or kept confidential and these are briefly discussed in the literature.

Survey data which is archived, or to which other researchers are given access, needs to be anonymised so that the confidentiality of respondents is protected. For example, surveys of employers' data on size and location require cautious handling; data on occupation, location, *etc.,* should be checked in surveys of people in small localities or organisations — for example, reporting one doctor in a village would mean easy identification; breaking down data by sex, age, occupation and division might mean that some employees in an organisation could be identified individually.

The use of pseudonyms is widespread in qualitative research, and Grinyer (2002) talks about involving respondents in their choice of pseudonym. In some cases, it is relevant to use pseudonyms, not just in published reports but throughout the study, in labelling interview notes, taped interviews, *etc.*

In some situations, respondents may not appreciate the implications of being named. Kobayashi (2001) suggests the possibility of needing separate reports for different audiences, to protect their identity and to meet the needs of different reporting styles for different purposes. Other authors also discuss the possible necessity to write targeted reports for different audiences to address issues of confidentiality and sensitivity.

4.5 Protecting research participants from undue intrusion, harm or distress

The general principle

Participants in research have a right to be protected from questions, situations or interventions in their lives which may cause them physical and/or psychological harm or distress, or which may be seen as unduly intrusive.

Dilemmas that may need to be addressed

What constitutes undue intrusion? How can the differential perceptions of participants about what constitutes intrusive, sensitive or private matters be balanced?

What causes harm? How can respondents' different reactions to similar situations and questions be dealt with?

Are harm and intrusion ever justified? How can a balance be struck between the benefits of researching and understanding a particular issue or topic, and the impact conducting a study may be seen to have on participants?

Discussion

Protection from undue intrusion

The right to privacy is related to the topics already discussed, but also adds another dimension to ethical issues. Voluntary participation and confidentiality are partly based on the principles of a person's right to privacy. Privacy basically means that people can expect to be free from intrusion. This can be interpreted in a number of ways and as with many of the issues discussed, there is not necessarily one correct way of ensuring that privacy is not infringed. For example, one potential respondent might feel their privacy is being infringed by a telephone call inviting them to participate in a study; another may not feel intruded on by very personal questions. Researchers, when designing a research project, need to make decisions on what they see as an infringement of privacy while being sensitive to the range of perceptions of their potential respondents. A balance will also have to be drawn between the need for the information, and the extent to which a study is prepared to invade privacy.

Bulmer (1979) discusses the intrusion into the home of respondents by interviewers and when this might become an infringement of privacy. In many ways, it is the attitudes of respondents to privacy which are paramount here. However, this can also cause methodological difficulties — for example, particular types of data may only be available from people with a certain viewpoint.

Many of the debates around privacy relate to issues already discussed in earlier sections in this chapter — for example, under confidentiality and anonymity. Ethnographers and those conducting participant observation have to decide whether to inform the authorities about illegal or potentially dangerous situations. An ethical question is where to draw the line between intrusion into the lives of certain individuals or groups, and the need to report particular situations to protect others, or society, more generally.

Many definitions of privacy emphasise the control by an individual of information about themselves as key. Before the advent of information technology, this was perhaps more straightforward. Now, however, so much information is held by both public and private organisations, that defining the boundaries of privacy is more complex. For example, personal information is provided to a wide range of service providers and sometimes during the purchase of consumer goods. The general public still (despite various controversies and newspaper reports) may not appreciate how much information is available about them, nor the extent to which this information is traded between organisations. This places an ethical imperative on researchers to be conscious of the ways in which they obtain and use data which may, by some respondents, be seen to invade their privacy.

New (or relatively new) technologies also offer additional ways of contacting potential respondents. For example, random digit dialling is used in some surveys to ensure representativeness in a situation where a growing proportion of people have ex-directory telephone numbers. This can, however, be seen as an infringement of privacy by those who are ex-directory, as stopping unsolicited calls may be one reason for them making this choice in the first place.

The issue of privacy becomes more complex in Internet research. There is a greater blurring between what is private and public space. For example, what some might regard as a private space — for example, a list or chat room — is often, in fact, a public one. Although it is normally the case that only those with an interest in the specific issue access any particular discussion, it may not occur to these people that what they say is effectively in the public domain. Mann and Stewart (2000) quote Ferri (2000):

> '… who is the intended audience of an electronic communication — and does it include you as a researcher? Most lists/chat rooms/and electronic spaces state an intended audience and many require you to subscribe. I have yet to see "people conducting research on the subscribers of this list" mentioned as an intended audience!'

Mann and Stewart (2000) discuss a number of examples and quote a number of authors. The general conclusion is that almost no electronic form of communication can be guaranteed to be private. Researchers, therefore, need to carefully consider the ethical implications of any research they conduct. If they are not informing potential participants and obtaining their consent, they need to be very aware of the extent to which the data they are accessing are considered to be in the public domain.

Protection from undue distress and harm

The protection from harm is another fundamental human right. In medical research, the concept of protection from harm is perhaps

clearer than in socio-economic research. In socio-economic research there are many debates about what can potentially cause harm.

The idea of prevention from harm and the protection of interests relates not just to the actual participants in research, but also those belonging to the larger group of which they are a part and, in some cases, society. It needs to be recognised how respondents and society more generally perceive harm. What harm is, is discussed more fully later in this section.

Is harm ever justified?

One overall question which emerges is whether any harm is ever justified. It is argued that, in some circumstances, causing harm to some respondents may be justified in the greater public good. For example, Sapsford and Abbott (1996) comment:

> *'Whether inflicting pain or distress is ever justified by the importance of a research topic is a question for each person to decide individually, but it is an* open *question. There comes a point in many people's thinking where one strong principle has to give way to another aspect of public good.'*

In the United States, random assignment is a widely accepted research methodology. For example, it is used in assessing the relevance and impact of various public programmes. In Britain this methodology has not, until very recently, been acceptable in socio-economic research. A discussion of whether this type of research causes harm or is against the interests of those researched, is included at the end of this section.

Some have taken arguments about not causing harm further, arguing that researchers should maximise the possible benefits from their research as well as minimising possible harm (Lee, 2000).

Whether causing harm to research participants is ever acceptable remains a contentious question. Many researchers would argue that to understand social processes and improve life for society as a whole, it may at times be necessary to conduct research which may upset or distress some respondents. There are, however, ways in which harm can be ameliorated or at least addressed, and these are discussed both in this section and elsewhere in this report.

What is harm?

In identifying what can potentially cause harm to research participants, it is important to be aware of the sensitivities of different participants. The most obvious examples relate to the nature of the interview, the topics covered and how it is conducted. However, this is not the only way in which harm can be caused, and researchers need to think about all aspects of their research design when considering the potential to cause harm.

Respondents, especially those from minority or vulnerable groups, might be sensitive about the way in which they were selected for study. For example, a study of domestic violence wanted to explore why women who made complaints to the police later withdrew their complaint (De Vaus, 2002; an example also used in Section 2.1). The study was aiming to help women experiencing domestic violence, but the sample was drawn in a way that distressed the women. Names were obtained through the Courts where complaints are lodged as public documents. Many women were very upset on receiving a questionnaire. They had believed that their complaint was secret. Thought needs to be given to the implications of using various sampling frames for research, and the potential impact on respondents. While, in this case, obtaining the sample from Court records was not wrong, more thought should have been given to the impact on respondents of receiving a questionnaire from a third party.

Much of the discussion on the nature of harm focuses on the emotional and psychological impact on respondents of discussing particular, usually sensitive, issues. Particular examples are sexual abuse, domestic violence, the experience of other violent episodes, the death of a child, and other experiences which impinge on very personal aspect of respondents' lives. There are many examples in the literature. In some cases, the potential impact on respondents of discussing sensitive or distressing episodes or events in their lives can be predicted, or at least the possibility that interviewing about particular events will be painful can be foreseen. However, this is not always the case. Aitkin (2001) in exploring the role of different partners in the domestic relationship found that seemingly innocuous questions about their daily routine could cause respondents to question their position. This raising of consciousness had the possibility of driving a wedge between partners — an outcome not intended or anticipated.

There are a range of other circumstances in which research could cause harm. For example, research may damage the reputation of a particular community or ethnic group, or even cause commercial harm to a sector or industry.

However, in some studies, respondents (perhaps after initial feelings of distress) find discussing such issues to be therapeutic. An independent outlet can be presented for feelings that they would not be prepared to discuss with someone close to them. Patton (2002) uses the example of interviewing families that had experienced sexual abuse. While the interviews could be intrusive and open old wounds, they could also be healing.

It is important that researchers are aware of the potential distress they can cause respondents. If conducting interviews for another researcher, the interviewer needs to be properly briefed about the possibility of distress. Interviewers need to be aware of ways of responding to this distress, and how far they are able, or prepared,

to go in offering counselling and support. Interviewees may not only be distressed but also not have the vocabulary with which to discuss the problem; they may need to be reassured and offered alternative means of expressing what they feel (for example, rewording questions, starting from a different perspective, and/or simplifying the language). Van Maanen (1988) comments:

> '… informants are as unsure and equivocal as to what happened, what is happening, or what will happen as the fieldworker.'

When participating in some qualitative studies, respondents open themselves up to the interviewer. They express feelings and talk about experiences they would not normally, or in a more open way than they might do in another situation. The propensity of a respondent to open up in this way does, to some extent, depend on the skills of the interviewer and the rapport which is developed between the two. The potential this provides for exploitation has been explored in much of the literature.

The power relation which can develop between a 'powerful' researcher and a possibly vulnerable respondent has been identified as another possible area in which harm can be caused. There is concern that the information provided could be psychologically, emotionally, personally or socially damaging to the respondents themselves, or the group of which they are a part. For example, Finch (1984) discusses the willingness of mothers using playgroups to disclose personal and private information to her. She felt it important not to abuse that trust by reporting the data in a way which would undermine the collective interests of these mothers. While their activities reflected the situation they were in and their ways of coping with this, she was concerned that some might interpret her findings to suggest that her respondents were inadequate and incompetent mothers. Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) report instances in which researchers have been unable to publish their findings due to a fear that these might damage the women they studied.

People can feel wronged without being harmed by research (Alderson, 1996). For example, they may feel they are being treated as objects, deceived, humiliated, or that their values or privacy are being disregarded.

The use to which findings are put has been touched on above. This is another area in which there is potential to cause harm, perhaps less often to individual respondents than to the group of which they are a part. This is an issue that is not totally within the control of the researcher, but it is something about which they need to be aware. However careful a researcher may be in reporting the data and drawing conclusions, there is always scope for others to place a different, perhaps harmful, interpretation on the data. Bulmer (2001) raises this issue in relation to the way the media reports findings. Certain newspapers are always on the look out for sensational headlines.

Foreseeing all the possible uses to which research might be used in the future and the possibility of harm from this is another issue researchers need to be aware of. Again, this is one over which they have limited (if any) control or influence. For example, a study on the budgeting methods used by people on benefits or on low wages, to explore and support their coping strategies, could later be used to criticise their financial management.

Ameliorating harm

Much of the discussion on the potential for harm relates to the types of harm that might occur. However, some researchers move on to discuss possible means of addressing the harm caused, or reducing its impact. Some of these means lead to additional ethical questions, which are discussed elsewhere in this report.

Examples include:

- being aware of the possibility of the topics covered or precise questions asked, causing distress to respondents, and thinking through how to address these in advance

- careful thinking about the lead-in to particular topics and the wording of sensitive questions

- building up a rapport with the respondent

- providing some level of counselling and support for the respondent (although this can lead to concerns about the quality of the data collected)

- thinking carefully about the most appropriate means of data collection.

Dale *et al.* (1988) reports that the 'clinical' approach of a survey can protect respondents from revealing more than they would wish (for example, on sensitive or personal issues). The formality of a survey situation means that a respondent is less likely to give potentially damaging or revealing information compared to what they might disclose in in-depth interviews. Furthermore, the formal interview might also provide more accessible escape routes for the respondent (*ie* it is easier to refuse questions; easier to evade a question than in an in-depth interview, where detailed elaboration can often be sought after the initial response). Not all researchers would agree with this. For example, Maynard (1994), and others, discuss the paternalistic, male-dominated stance of a formal survey. It is possible that such an approach, through raising sensitive questions without offering an outlet, could create more harm than a qualitative approach.

Random assignment/experimental research

A specific type of research that has long been controversial in British socio-economic research, but seems to be gaining some

acceptance over here, is that of random assignment. This raises a number of ethical issues, in particular in relation to whether harm is caused to those not assigned an intervention.

Gorard (2002) discusses ethical issues in experimental research. The focus has been on whether harm is caused to those involved in research, but not on the wider community. A decision needs to be made about whether the harm to those not receiving an intervention in controlled experiments is over-ridden by the benefits of knowing whether this intervention works effectively.

A consensus seems to be emerging that as long as those not assigned to an experimental intervention do not lose anything to which they were already entitled (most of this research is on social benefits so loss of such benefits is really the issue here), they are not being harmed. Furthermore, the advantages of properly exploring whether an intervention leads to an improvement (in whatever it is aimed at) needs to be balanced against some not receiving the additional support.

Stafford *et al.* (2002) summarise the US literature. They report that experience from the US suggests that the onus is on those supporting a controlled experiment to demonstrate that it does not violate ethical standards. Boruch (1997) lists five questions which need to be asked to test the ethical status of an experiment:

- Is there a need for improvement?
- Is the effectiveness of proposed improvements uncertain?
- Will a randomised experiment yield more defensible evidence than alternatives?
- Will the results be used?
- Will the rights of participants be protected?

He suggests that positive answers are needed to all these questions to justify a controlled experiment.

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Gruppendiskussionen und qualitativen Einzelinterviews*

Richtlinie fur Beobachtungen bei demoskopischen Untersuchungen

Richtinie fur telefonische Befragungen

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Standards zur Qualitatssicherung in der Markt- und Sozialforschung

Standards zur Qualitatssicherung fur Online-Befragungen

Checkliste fur Auftraggeber von Online-Befragungen

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