

Methodologies

Ethics

Participants' interests, confidentiality, and consent



In conducting research social scientists must be aware of ethical issues. First, informed consent of participants needs to be obtained when conducting research. Second, it is crucial that social researchers maintain anonymity and confidentiality when necessary in order to protect research participants. Third, they have to be mindful of the interests of research participants when drawing conclusion and presenting research findings.

The interests of research participants must always be considered when researchers present a study's conclusions, recommendations, etc. The researchers cannot predict at the outset what their findings will be and how these may relate to the interests of individuals or groups they researched. However, there has been a great deal of debate about values and objectivity in social research: should social researchers 'take sides', or try to be as objective as possible?

Some scientists think it is the truthfulness of representation that matters most. But there are researchers who insist that it is unethical if social scientists do not have or express sympathy for those

they research. Research is always political and the question is 'whose side are we on?' Do we side with those who are powerful or with those in a vulnerable position? Also, social scientists argue that it is no longer appropriate to stay neutral, social research has to talk about phenomena it studies in moral and ethical terms.

Anonymity and confidentiality are other key principles in social research. They are enshrined in professional guidelines and codes of practice. In most cases it is crucial that those who take part in research remain anonymous and that their responses are kept confidential.

But these issues raise challenges for researchers. In quantitative research, researchers need to take care that data are anonymous and are not linked in ways that might identify individuals. In qualitative research, the issues can be more problematic in that researchers often develop close relationships with participants where personal information may be disclosed and data are hard to anonymise.



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Confidentiality means not disclosing any information gained from an interviewee deliberately or accidentally in ways that might identify an individual. Dr Rose Wiles and colleagues at the University of Southampton have explored how researchers manage issues of confidentiality and the contexts of deliberate and accidental disclosures. This research found that researchers tend not to feel obliged to disclose information about minor illegal activity. They believe their primary responsibility is to protect participants' best interests, and that these are not served by disclosing such information to legal authorities.

In some cases individuals are easily identifiable, and reporting on their responses might have negative consequences for them. Where researchers perceive this to be the case they may want to exclude data relating to individuals or change their characteristics, so as to disguise them in writing up and reporting the findings of a study.

Some researchers, however, question whether anonymity is possible or even necessary. Increasingly, certain groups, particularly young people, want and expect to be identified in research - some take part enthusiastically precisely because they expect to be identified. Nevertheless, researchers believe they have a duty to weigh up the potential risks and benefits of identification and anonymity. As one researcher commented:

“There’s a responsibility on the researcher to be mindful that the respondent isn’t always aware of the effects of being identified ... the important thing to think about is the implications.”

In the end, decisions about anonymity and confidentiality depend on context. The ‘right’ decision will vary from study to study.

What does not vary is the permission of research participants, which must be obtained with their full knowledge of the possible risks and benefits. This is called informed consent. Informed consent might not always be beneficial to social researchers – for example, it may lead to a denial of access when potential participants are afraid of publicity despite being reassured that they will not be identified. Also, informed consent might be problematic for observation when this is covert and cannot be openly acknowledged for a practical reason – it will affect the behaviour of observed individuals.

Questions to think about

“Certain groups want and expect to be identified in research - some take part precisely because they expect to be identified”

- Can you identify examples of when participants identity should be strictly protected?
- Can you identify examples of when it might be permissible to allow some information to be identified?

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Doing research ethically

Young people's perspectives on ethics



When carrying out research with children and young people, social scientists should be acutely aware of the research ethics because of the participants vulnerability. One of the most crucial ethical issues is that interests of those participating in research must always be regarded as of very important. But what do children and young people themselves say about anonymity, confidentiality and consent?

Rachel Ormston and colleagues from the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) conducted a study to find out what children and young people, aged 7 to 15, think about ethical issues when taking part in surveys. The researchers interviewed focus groups consisting of primary and secondary school pupils in London, using videos with actors to illustrate issues that might arise.

One of the questions asked was whether or not parents should be involved in deciding if a child or young person under 16 should take part in a survey. Is a parent sitting next to a child or young adult at an interview in the best interests of the child? Is it the child who decides this, or should parents make the decision for them? All the groups came up with reasons for and against the parents' involvement.

Some suggested that if the child is the one doing the survey, it should be entirely up to them. However, reasoned the pupils, it would depend greatly on the age of the child, the topic, and where the interview was

being held (for example, if it was at home, the parent might need to have a say). The focus group participants felt that it might sometimes help to have a parent there if they felt nervous or shy about taking part. A parent might also be able to help the child find the right words, or to act as 'back up' if the interviewer asked them something they did not want to answer.

Reasons for not wanting a parent present included feeling embarrassed answering questions in front of them, especially if the survey covered 'personal' issues such as drugs, bullying, or even school life and friendships. If they wanted to keep something private from their parent, some children and young people might give false answers.

Another ethical issue the researcher and pupils discussed was confidentiality and anonymity. What if a child tells a researcher something that make them worried the child is at risk of harm? One view was that if a child said they were worried about things like homework, or that they had stolen something, the researcher ought to tell a teacher or parent. But others felt that even if a child told the interviewer something really serious – for example, that their parent had hit them – it is up to the child, not the interviewer, whether they pass this information on.

- Do you think they're right?
- What's your opinion on these issues?

