

Research Ethics

Chapter Summary

Introduction

From its very start, every sociological study is not only concerned with selecting research orientation and choosing its design but also with ethical issues in treatment of its participants. History of social science contains many examples where well-meaning researchers harmed the participants in some ways: by subjecting them to psychological stress, deceiving them by not disclosing the aim of the research, or by conducting a fully covert research without informing the participants. These examples raised the important question of the extent to which the pursuit of knowledge and scientific truth justifies unethical behaviour of researchers. They also resulted in elaboration of ethical research guides and establishment of ethical review boards at the universities. Handling the ethical issues in any project affects the outcomes of the research and the reputation of social science as a whole.

General Ethical Principles

Ethical principles are difficult to agree on, given that researchers have different boundaries for determining acceptable practices and that the *TCPS2* itself is flexible enough to allow for variation in research methods. However, researchers generally agree that ethical implications in research are very important and must always be considered. There are three core overlapping principles established in the *TCPS2*: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice.

Respect for Persons

The principle of respect for persons means that research subjects should not be treated as “objects” or simply as resources to be used for some end. Individuals have basic human rights that entitle them to dignified treatment by researchers. Hence, respect for persons is the most fundamental of the three ethical principles of research. Informed consent, which is free and ongoing consent to participate in the research, is the starting point of respecting individuals. Potential participants must be made aware of the risks they face in joining the study as well as of its potential benefits.

In quantitative studies, participants are typically given an information sheet or a letter of information that outlines the research project, the methods, the potential risks, and benefits of participating. Another document that respondents are asked to consider is the consent form, which includes brief information on the study and also contains assurances about the ethical treatment of participants. The consent form states, for example, that the participant can leave the study at any time and that they agree to terms and conditions of the study. It is important to note that the

consent should be given freely, i.e., out of individual's free will. This means that the consenting person must have the ability to understand the purpose of the research and the ability to actually consent before being asked to do so. Where this ability is limited (e.g., a person is a child, or incapacitated due to illness), the potential research subject must have an agent or a guardian provide the consent.

The principle of free and informed consent has some caveats in its implementation:

- It is often impossible to give the respondents the exhaustive information about the study, because not all the research situations may be foreseen.
- During an ethnographic study, the researcher may come in contact with many people, and it would be unfeasible to obtain consent from each and every participant, particularly if the encounters with them are brief.
- Disclosing all the conditions of the study may be particularly problematic during an experiment, because reactive effects may occur when people know they are being studied.

The extent of deception present and allowed in a research project is often a subject of fierce debates. The emerging consent in sociology is that deception should be used as a last resort, should be brief, and participants should be debriefed at the earliest opportunity.

Concern for Welfare

Concern for welfare is a concern for the well-being of the person, group, or community that may be in any way impacted by the research. Privacy and confidentiality are the most commonly recognized issues around welfare. Research ethics boards (REBs) will require detailed assurances about observing confidentiality, such as ensuring anonymity, securing the safe storage of information, and impossibility of its leakage to the third party. This is a step toward ensuring that no one is identified, harmed, or embarrassed due to participating in research, during and after its completion. The concerns of confidentiality may be eased where the research deals with historical issues or public figures.

Ensuring anonymity may require that the researchers use a random response technique when studying sensitive topics. This method allows respondents to give answers to sensitive questions without the risk of being identified. The method establishes a minimum percentage of answers to the question in aggregate form, by adding a coin toss into the questions. The participants are then asked to answer the sensitive question (e.g., using cocaine) in the affirmative if they flip tails and honestly if they flip head. This establishes a rough estimate that 50 per cent of the answers are invalid, because people answered "yes" to the question just because they flipped tails, and the proportion of people who randomly flipped tails is roughly 50 per cent in any group. Therefore, the researcher only counts the affirmative answers on top of the randomly expected 50 per cent and then multiplies the figure by two to get the total estimate of the affirmative answer for the sensitive question in the entire group. The method ensures that questions about sensitive issues can be answered without collecting direct individual-level answers.

While in quantitative research confidentiality is achieved by assigning numerical codes to every respondent, ensuring confidentiality may be difficult in qualitative research. Qualitative research is more likely to study a small number of people, and they may be identifiable even if pseudonyms were used in the study but the community is small and known to the public. Some qualitative researchers argue that truthful results may only be obtained by covert research, where the researcher does not inform the people that they are being studied. These researchers claim that it would be impossible to obtain the data by any other means. At times, qualitative researchers consciously reject the requirements of confidentiality towards a group which is secondary in their study and whose activities they do not condone (such as the clients of the sex workers in a study of prostitution). The issue is to what extent the researchers should respect the rights of their immediate subjects and neglect the rights of the others whose behaviour they do not consider ethical.

In some situations, the breach of confidentiality may be considered warranted, just as in the situations where deception is ethically warranted. For example, should researchers breach confidentiality when they observe instances of abuse or criminal behaviour? Similarly, should researchers disclose information about the sponsor, when they see that participants of the study may be harmed as the result of the sponsor-funded research? Is the researcher's conflict of interest affecting the results of the study? These questions do not always have easy answers. The *TCPS2* requires that all sponsorship and potential conflict of interest be reported. It also states that the welfare of the research participants "takes precedence over the interests of researcher and sponsors," and the REB's obligation is to consider ethical implications of sponsored research to ensure that legally-binding confidentiality agreements with a sponsor do not conflict with the *TSPS2* policy.

Justice

Justice is the notion that no person or group should be exploited in the research and nobody should be systematically excluded from its benefits. For example, inmates should not be used as research guinea pigs for the rest of society. Inclusivity is usually not a problem for social research because by its very nature social research is more likely to study exploited and disadvantaged groups. However, in some instances, researchers have looked down on their research subjects and treated them poorly, and such unjust treatment must be minimized. All subjects of the study should be treated equally—this is the first requirement of justice.

The second requirement of justice in research is to ensure minimization of harm to participants at any time. However, the notion of harm may often not be clearly defined and not easily quantifiable. Will a participant feel stress, shame, or physical harm during the research? Which of these consequences cause more harm to participants, and are some harms more long-term than the others?

While the general principle of research is to avoid harming the participants, the researcher cannot always foresee all potential risks, and can use different criteria to evaluate what constitutes a potential harm. A criterion of avoiding any potential harm might be unfeasible because some degree of undesirable consequences can be found in almost any behaviour. On the other hand, the criterion that the risk of harm should be no greater than the risks of everyday life may create difficulties in estimating what the risks of everyday life actually are. In any case, if the researcher foresees any form of harm to participants at all, the minimum ethical requirement is to obtain participants' informed consent. People are definitely less likely to be harmed if they know what to expect from research.

One definite way to decrease harm to participants is to give them the option to withdraw from the study at any time. This idea was not adhered to in Zimbardo's (1971) Stanford prison experiment, when respondents were induced to remain in the study after they suffered their first humiliations as prisoners. The experiment was terminated only after serious nervous breakdowns of several participants. Ideally, the REB process should identify the project's potential problems and address them before any harm occurs. Zimbardo's study would have a very low chance of replication in the present, because REBs most likely would identify the potential harm of the study as too high before it even begins.

Another requirement of justice is that participants' right to withdraw from the study should not be influenced by paying for participation. Sometimes the participants decide to stay in the study—regardless of the harm it is causing—in order to receive remuneration. For this reason, offering payment to participants in exchange for risks they are taking is considered unethical in social research.

Finally, justice requires that the proposed research projects receive impartial adjudication by ethics boards. REBs must make just and unbiased decisions as to which project should proceed, and universities should refrain from interference into REBs' independence and decisions.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you should learn to do the following:

- Understand the importance of respecting ethical guidelines for success of a study and for the reputation of social science as a whole
- Mention the main institutions and documents governing ethical concerns in Canadian social research and understand in what ways they influence research and affect academic freedom
- Describe and learn to apply the three essential principles of ethical treatment of research participants, including respect for persons, concern for their well-being, and justice
- Understand that the main practical guideline for ethical treatment of research participants is that they should be subjected to minimal amount of harm during the research process and that any benefit occurring from the study must be greater than the risks incurred by participants
- Identify the main ethical issues in the classical studies given as examples of breach in ethical principles
- Be able to compile a consent form or information sheet for a study, mentioning all the necessary points these documents should include
- Establish in what ways ethical concerns in qualitative research may be different or greater compared to those in quantitative research

Media Resources

Complete the *TCPS2* Tutorial on Research Ethics

<http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/education/tutorial-didacticiel/>

Review the following webpages, which outline Milgram's Study of Obedience experiments:

http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/psychology/milgram_obedience_experiment.html

- What is the impact of Milgram's initial study on his later research?
- What is the impact of Milgram's initial study on academic research practices?
- What is the impact of Milgram's work on medical research?
- What is the impact of Milgram's work on private market research practices?

Read Chapter 10 "Qualitative Research" from *TCPS2's 2014 Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*:

www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/pdf/eng/tcps2-2014/TCPS_2_FINAL_Web.pdf

- What is the significance of informed consent in qualitative research?
- How is it difficult to actualize the three ethical imperatives of social research in qualitative research projects?
- What are the difficulties with legitimizing data collection strategies?

Read the following webpage, "Subject Matter Eligibility," from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of the Government of Canada:

http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/apply-demande/background-reseignements/selecting_agency-choisir_organisme_subventionnaire-eng.aspx

- What is the impact of ethics on the SSHRC application process?
- Is there a difference in the way ethical concerns must be dealt with for health research projects and social research projects?
- Are the ethics considerations different for Master Scholarship applications and Post-doctoral Fellowship applications?