

CHAPTER 14

Considering Ethical Issues in Data Collection

In this chapter you will learn about:

- Ethics: the concept
- Stakeholders in research
- Ethical issues to consider concerning research participants
- Ethical issues to consider relating to the researcher
- Ethical issues to consider regarding the sponsoring organisation

Keywords: *bias, code of conduct, confidentiality, deprivation of treatment, ethos, harm, informed consent, principles of conduct, research participants, sensitive information, sponsoring organisations, stakeholders, subjectivity.*

Ethics: the concept

All professions are guided by a code of ethics that has evolved over the years to accommodate the changing ethos, values, needs and expectations of those who hold a stake in the professions. Some professions are more advanced than others in terms of the level of development of their code of ethics. Some have very strict guidelines, monitor conduct effectively and take appropriate steps against those who do not abide by the guidelines.

Most professions have an overall code of conduct that also governs the way they carry out research. In addition, many research bodies have evolved a code of ethics separately for research. Medicine, epidemiology, business, law, education, psychology and other social sciences have well-established codes of ethics for research.

Let us first examine what we mean by ‘ethics’ or ‘ethical behaviour’. According to the *Collins Dictionary* (1979: 502), ethical means ‘in accordance with principles of conduct that are considered correct, especially those of a given profession or group’. The keywords here, ‘principles of conduct’ and ‘considered correct’, raise certain questions:

- What are these principles of conduct?
- Who determines them?

- In whose judgement must they be considered correct?

Closely related questions are as follows:

- Are there universal principles of conduct that can be applied to all professions?
- Do these change with time?
- Should they?
- What happens when a professional does not abide by them?

The subject of ethics needs to be considered in light of these questions.

The way each profession serves society is continuously changing in accordance with society's needs and expectations and with the technology available for the delivery of a service. The ethical codes governing the manner in which a service is delivered also need to change. What has been considered ethical in the past may not be so judged at present, and what is ethical now may not remain so in the future. Any judgement about whether a particular practice is ethical is made on the basis of the code of conduct prevalent at that point in time.

As the service and its manner of delivery differ from profession to profession, no code of conduct can be uniformly applied across all professions. Each profession has its own code of ethics, though there are commonalities. If you want guidelines on ethical conduct for a particular profession, you need to consult the code of ethics adopted by that profession or discipline.

'What are these principles of conduct?' is the most important question as it addresses the issue of the contents of **ethical practice** in a profession. As the code of conduct varies from profession to profession, it is not possible to provide a universal answer to this question. However, in research, any dilemma stemming from a moral quandary is a basis of ethical conduct. There are certain behaviours in research – such as causing harm to individuals, breaching confidentiality, using information improperly and introducing bias – that are considered **unethical** in any profession.

The next question is: in whose judgement must a code of conduct be considered correct? Who decides whether a particular practice is wrong? If a procedure is carried out wrongly, what penalties should be imposed? It is the overall body of professionals or government organisations that collectively develops a professional code of conduct and forms a judgement as to whether or not it is being followed.

As mentioned, most professions have established an overall code of ethics and also a code of ethics for conducting research in their respective fields. As this book is designed for researchers in the social sciences, we will examine ethical issues relating to research in general and issues that are applicable to most social science disciplines.

Stakeholders in research

There are many **stakeholders in research**, whether it is quantitative or qualitative. It is important to look at ethical issues in relation to each of them. The various stakeholders in a research activity are:

1. the research participants or subjects;
2. the researcher;
3. the funding body.

Who should be considered as a research participant varies from profession to profession. Generally, all those with direct and indirect involvement in a research study are considered as research participants, hence stakeholders. In addition, those who are likely to be affected by the findings of a study are also considered as stakeholders. In the fields of medicine, public health, epidemiology and nursing, patients and non-patients who become part of a study and those who participate in an experiment to test the effectiveness of a drug or treatment are considered as research participants. Service providers, service managers and planners who are involved in either providing the service or collecting information relating to the study are also stakeholders in the research. In the social sciences, the participants include individuals, groups and communities providing information to help a researcher to gain understanding of a phenomenon, situation, issue or interaction. In social work and psychology, participants include clients as well as non-clients of an agency from whom information is collected to find out the magnitude of a problem, the needs of a community or the effectiveness of an intervention; and service providers, social workers and psychologists, when they provide information for a study. In marketing, consumers as well as non-consumers of a product provide information about consumption patterns and behaviour. In education, subjects include students, teachers and perhaps the community at large who participate in educational research activities. Similarly, in any discipline in which a research activity is undertaken, those from whom information is collected or those who are studied by a researcher become participants of the study.

Researchers constitute the second category of stakeholders. Anyone who collects information for the specific purpose of understanding, consolidation, enhancement and development of professional knowledge, adhering to the accepted code of conduct, is a researcher. S/he may represent any academic discipline.

Funding organisations responsible for financing a research activity fall into the third category of stakeholders. Most research is carried out using funds provided by business organisations, pharmaceutical companies, service institutions (government, semi-government or voluntary), research bodies and/or academic institutions. The funds are given for specific purposes.

Each category of stakeholders in a research activity may have different interests, perspectives, purposes, aims and motivations that could affect the way in which the research activity is carried out and the way results are communicated and used. Because of this, it is important to ensure that research is not affected by the self-interest of any party and is not carried out in a way that harms any party. It is therefore important to examine ethical conduct in research concerning different stakeholders under separate categories.

Ethical issues to consider concerning research participants

There are many ethical issues to consider in relation to the participants of a research activity.

Collecting information

One could ask: why should a respondent give any information to a researcher? What right does a researcher have to knock at someone's door or to send out a questionnaire? Is it ethical to disturb an individual, even if you ask permission before asking questions? Why should a person give you his/her time? Your request for information may create anxiety or put pressure on a respondent. Is this ethical?

But the above questions display a naive attitude. The author believes that if this attitude had been adopted, there would have been no progress in the world. Research is required in order to improve

conditions. Provided any piece of research is likely to help society directly or indirectly, it is acceptable to ask questions, if you first obtain the respondents' **informed consent**. Before you begin collecting information, you must consider the relevance and usefulness of the research you are undertaking and be able to convince others of this also. If you cannot justify the relevance of the research you are conducting, you are wasting your respondents' time, which is unethical.

Seeking consent

In every discipline it is considered unethical to collect information without the knowledge of participants, and their expressed willingness and informed consent. Seeking informed consent 'is probably the most common method in medical and social research' (Bailey 1978: 384). Informed consent implies that subjects are made adequately aware of the type of information you want from them, why the information is being sought, what purpose it will be put to, how they are expected to participate in the study, and how it will directly or indirectly affect them. It is important that the consent should also be voluntary and without pressure of any kind. Schinke and Gilchrist write:

Under standards set by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, all informed-consent procedures must meet three criteria: participants must be competent to give consent; sufficient information must be provided to allow for a reasoned decision; and consent must be voluntary and uncoerced. (1993: 83)

Competency, according to Schinke and Gilchrist, 'is concerned with the legal and mental capacities of participants to give permission' (1993: 83). For example, some very old people, those suffering from conditions that exclude them from making informed decisions, people in crisis, people who cannot speak the language in which the research is being carried out, people who are dependent upon you for a service and children are not considered to be competent.

Providing incentives

Is it ethical to provide incentives to respondents to share information with you? Some researchers provide incentives to participants for their participation in a study, feeling this to be quite proper as participants are giving their time. Others think that the offering of inducements is unethical.

In the author's experience most people do not participate in a study because of incentives, but because they realise the importance of the study. Therefore, giving a small gift after having obtained your information, as a token of appreciation, is in the author's opinion not unethical. However, giving a present before data collection is unethical.

Seeking sensitive information

Information sought can pose an ethical dilemma in research. Certain types of information can be regarded as sensitive or confidential by some people and thus an invasion of privacy. Asking for this information may upset or embarrass a respondent. However, if you do not ask for the information, it may not be possible to pursue your interest in the area and contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

For most people, questions on sexual behaviour, drug use and shoplifting are intrusive. Even questions on marital status, income and age may be considered to be an invasion of privacy by some. In collecting data you need to be careful about the sensitivities of your respondents.

The dilemma you face as a researcher is whether you should ask sensitive and intrusive questions. In the author's opinion it is not unethical to ask such questions provided that you clearly and frankly tell your respondents the type of information you are going to ask, and give them sufficient time to decide if they want to share the information with you, without any major inducement.

The possibility of causing harm to participants

Is the research going to harm participants in any way? Harm includes:

not only hazardous medical experiments but also any social research that might involve such things as discomfort, anxiety, harassment, invasion of privacy, or demeaning or dehumanising procedures. (Bailey 1978: 384)

When you collect data from respondents or involve subjects in an experiment, you need to examine carefully whether their involvement is likely to harm them in any way. If it is, you must make sure that the risk is minimal. Minimum risk means that the extent of harm or discomfort in the research is not greater than that ordinarily encountered in daily life. It is unethical if the way you seek information creates anxiety or harassment, and if you think it may happen, you need to take steps to prevent this.

Maintaining confidentiality

Sharing information about a respondent with others for purposes other than research is unethical. Sometimes you need to identify your study population to put your findings into context. In such a situation you need to make sure that at least the information provided by respondents is kept anonymous. It is unethical to identify an individual respondent and the information provided by him/her. Therefore, you need to ensure that after the information has been collected, its source cannot be identified. In certain types of study you might need to visit respondents repeatedly, in which case you will have to identify them until the completion of your visits. In such situations you need to be extra careful that others do not have access to the information. It is unethical to be negligent in not protecting the confidentiality and anonymity of the information gathered from your respondents. If you are doing research for someone else, you need to make sure that confidentiality is maintained by this party as well.

Ethical issues to consider relating to the researcher

Avoiding bias

Bias on the part of the researcher is unethical. Bias is different from subjectivity. Subjectivity, as mentioned earlier, is related to your educational background, training and competence in research, and your philosophical perspective. Bias is a deliberate attempt either to hide what you have found in your study, or to highlight something disproportionately to its true existence. It is absolutely unethical to introduce bias into a research activity. If you are unable to control your bias, you should not be engaging in the research. Remember, it is the bias that is unethical and not the subjectivity.

Provision or deprivation of a treatment

Both the provision and deprivation of a treatment may pose an ethical dilemma for you as a researcher. When testing an intervention or a treatment, a researcher usually adopts a control experiment design. In such studies, is it ethical to provide a study population with an intervention or treatment that has not yet been conclusively proven effective or beneficial? But if you do not test a treatment/intervention, how can you prove or disprove its effectiveness or benefits? On the other hand, you are providing an intervention that may not be effective. Is this ethical? Is it ethical to deprive the control group of a treatment even if it may prove to be only slightly effective? And beyond the issue of control groups, is it ethical to deprive people who are struggling for life of the possible benefit, however small, which may be derived from a drug that is only under trial? As a researcher you need to be aware of these ethical issues. There are arguments and counter-arguments about these issues. However, it is usually accepted that deprivation of a trial treatment to a control group is not unethical as, in the absence of this, a study can never establish the effectiveness of a treatment which may deprive many others of its possible benefits. This deprivation of the possible benefits, on the other hand, is considered by some as unethical.

There are no simple answers to these dilemmas. Ensuring informed consent, 'minimum risk' and frank discussion as to the implications of participation in the study may help to resolve some of these ethical issues.

Using inappropriate research methodology

A researcher has an obligation to use appropriate methodology, within his/her knowledge base, in conducting a study. It is unethical to use deliberately a method or procedure you know to be inappropriate to prove or disprove something that you want to, such as by selecting a highly biased sample, using an invalid instrument or by drawing wrong conclusions.

Incorrect reporting

To report the findings in a way that changes or slants them to serve your own or someone else's interest is unethical. Correct and unbiased reporting of the findings are important characteristics of ethical research practice.

Inappropriate use of the information

How will the information obtained from respondents be used by the researcher? The use of information in a way that directly or indirectly affects respondents adversely is unethical. Can information be used adversely to affect the study population? If so, how can the study population be protected? As a researcher you need to consider and resolve these issues. Sometimes it is possible to harm individuals in the process of achieving benefits for organisations. An example would be a study to examine the feasibility of restructuring an organisation. Restructuring may be beneficial to the organisation as a whole but may be harmful to some individuals. Should you ask respondents for information that is likely to be used against them? If you do, the information may be used against them, and if you do not, the organisation may not be able to derive the benefits of restructuring. In the author's opinion, it is ethical to ask questions provided you tell respondents of the potential use of the information, including

the possibility of its being used against some of them, and you let them decide if they want to participate. Some may participate for the betterment of the organisation even though it may harm them and others may decide against it. However, to identify either of them is unethical in research.

Ethical issues regarding the sponsoring organisation

Restrictions imposed by the sponsoring organisation

Most research in the social sciences is carried out using funds provided by sponsoring organisations for a specific purpose. The funds may be given to develop a programme or evaluate it; to examine its effectiveness and efficiency; to study the impact of a policy; to test a product; to study the behaviour of a group or community; or to study a phenomenon, issue or attitude. Sometimes there may be direct or indirect controls exercised by sponsoring organisations. They may select the methodology, prohibit the publication of 'what was found' or impose other restrictions on the research that may stand in the way of obtaining and disseminating accurate information. Both the imposition and acceptance of these controls and restrictions are unethical, as they constitute interference and could amount to the sponsoring organisation tailoring research findings to meet its vested interests.

The misuse of information

How is the sponsoring body going to use the information? How is this likely to affect the study population? Sometimes sponsoring organisations use research as a pretext for obtaining management's agenda. It is unethical to let your research be used as a reason for justifying management decisions when the research findings do not support them. However, it is recognised that it may be extremely difficult or even impossible for a researcher to prevent this from happening.

Summary

This chapter is designed to make you aware of the ethical issues to be considered when conducting research. The ethical issues to be considered are the same in both quantitative and qualitative research. How you resolve them depends upon you, and the conditions under which you are working.

Being ethical means adhering to the code of conduct that has evolved over the years for an acceptable professional practice. Any deviation from this code of conduct is considered as unethical and the greater the deviation, the more serious the breach. For most professions ethical codes in research are an integral part of their overall ethics, though some research bodies have evolved their own codes.

Ethical issues in research can be looked at as they relate to research participants, researchers and sponsoring organisations. With regard to research participants, the following areas could pose ethical issues if not dealt with properly: collecting information; seeking consent; providing incentives; seeking sensitive information; the possibility of causing harm to participants; and maintaining confidentiality. It is important to examine these areas thoroughly for any unethical practice. With regard to the researcher, areas of ethical concern include the following: introducing bias; providing and depriving individuals of treatment; using unacceptable research methodology; inaccurate reporting; and the inappropriate use of information. Ethical considerations in relation to sponsoring organisations concern restrictions imposed on research designs and the possible use of findings. As a newcomer to research you should be aware of what constitutes unethical practice and be able to put appropriate strategies in place to deal with any harm that may be done to any stakeholder.