Social Research Methods

Second Edition

ALAN BRYMAN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

observers were 'inducing subjects to perform reprehensible acts'. Indeed, yet another series of studies in which Milgram was involved placed participants in positions where they were being influenced to steal (Milgram and Shotland 1973).

- Many of the participants in Humphreys's (1970) research (see Box 25.1) were married men who are likely to have been fearful of detection as practising homosexuals. It is not inconceivable that his methods could have resulted in some of them becoming identified against their will.

The BSA *Statement of Ethical Practice* enjoins researchers to 'anticipate, and to guard against, consequences for research participants which can be predicted to be harmful' and 'to consider carefully the possibility that the research experience may be a disturbing one'. Similar sentiments are expressed by the SRA's *Ethical Guidelines*, for example, when it is advocated that the 'social researcher should try to minimize disturbance both to subjects themselves and to the subjects' relationships with their environment'.

The issue of harm to participants is further addressed in ethical codes by advocating care over maintaining the confidentiality of records. This means that the identities and records of individuals should be maintained as confidential. This injunction also means that care needs to be taken when findings are being published to ensure that individuals are not identified or identifiable. The case of a study of an American town, Springdale (a pseudonym), by Vidich and Bensman (1968) is instructive in this regard. The research was based on Vidich's participant observation within the town for over two years. The published book on the research was uncomplimentary about the town and many of its leaders and was written in what many people felt was a rather patronizing tone. To make matters worse, it was possible to identify individuals through the published account. The town's inhabitants responded with a Fourth of July Parade in which many of the inhabitants wore badges with their pseudonyms, and an effigy of Vidich was set up so that it was peering into manure. The townspeople also responded by announcing their refusal to cooperate in any more social research. The inhabitants were clearly upset by the publication and to that extent were harmed by it. This example also touches on the issue of privacy, which will be addressed below.

As this last case suggests, the issue of confidentiality raises particular difficulties for many forms of qualitative research. In quantitative research, it is relatively easy to anonymize records and to report findings in a way that does not allow individuals to be identified. However, this is often less easy with qualitative research, where particular care has to be taken with regard to the possible identification of persons and places. The use of pseudonyms is a common recourse, but may not eliminate entirely the possibility of identification. This issue raises particular problems with regard to the secondary analysis of qualitative data (see Chapter 19), since it is very difficult, though by no means impossible, to present field notes and interview transcripts in a way that will prevent people and places from being identified. As Alderson (1998) has suggested, the difficulty is one of being able to ensure that the same safeguards concerning confidentiality can be guaranteed when secondary analysts examine such records as those provided by the original primary researcher.

The need for confidentiality can present dilemmas for researchers. Westmarland (2001) has discussed the dilemmas she faced when observing violence by the police towards people being held in custody. She argues that while a certain level of violence might be deemed acceptable, in part to protect the officers themselves and the public, there is an issue of at what point it is no longer acceptable and the researcher needs to inform on those involved. Moreover, such a reasonable level of violence may be consistent with the police occupational culture. The problem for the ethnographer is compounded by the fact that blowing the whistle on violence may result in a loss of the researcher's credibility among officers, premature termination of the investigation, or inability to gain access in the future. In the process, career issues are brought to the fore for the researcher and connects with the discussion of political issues towards the end of this chapter. Similarly, in a feminist study of girls' experiences of violence, Burman *et al.* (2001) encountered some distressing revelations which prompted them to ask 'exactly what, and how much,

Practical Tip *Ethics committees*

In addition to needing to be familiar with the codes of practice produced by several professional associations like the British Sociological Association, American Sociological Association, and the Social Research Association, you should be acquainted with the ethical guidelines of your university or college. Most higher education organizations have ethics committees that issue guidelines about ethical practice. These guidelines are often based on or influenced by the codes developed by professional associations. Universities' and colleges' guidelines will provide indications of what are considered ethically unacceptable practices. Sometimes, you will need to submit your proposed research to an ethics committee of your university or college. This is likely to occur if there is some uncertainty about whether your proposed research is likely to be in breach of the guidelines or if you want to go ahead with research that you know is ethically dubious but you wish to obtain permission to do it anyway. The ethical guidelines and the ethics committee are there to protect research participants, but they are also involved in protecting institutions, so that researchers will be deterred from behaving in ethically unacceptable ways that might rebound on institutions. Such behaviour could cause problems for institutions if ethically inappropriate behaviour gave rise to legal action against them or to adverse publicity. However, ethics committees and their guidelines are there to help and protect researchers too, so that they are less likely to conduct research that could damage their reputations.

Ethical principles

Discussions about ethical principles in social research, and perhaps more specifically transgressions of them, tend to revolve around certain issues that recur in different guises but that have been usefully broken down by Diener and Crandall (1978) into four main areas:

- whether there is *harm to participants*;
- whether there is a *lack of informed consent*;
- whether there is an *invasion of privacy*;
- whether *deception* is involved.

I will look at each of these in turn, but it should be appreciated that these four principles overlap somewhat. For example, it is difficult to imagine how the principle of informed consent could be built into an investigation in which research participants were deceived. However, there is no doubt that these four areas form a useful classification of ethical principles in and for social research.

Harm to participants

Research that is likely to harm participants is regarded by most people as unacceptable. But what is harm? Harm can entail a number of facets: physical harm; harm to participants' development; loss of self-esteem; stress; and 'inducing subjects to perform reprehensible acts', as Diener and Crandall (1978: 19) put it. In several studies that we have encountered in this book, there has been real or potential harm to participants.

- In the Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) study (Box 2.6), it is at least possible that the pupils that had not been identified as 'spurters' who would excel in their studies were adversely affected in their intellectual development by the greater attention received by the spurters.
- In the Festinger *et al.* (1956) study of a religious cult, it is quite likely that the fact that the researchers joined the group at a crucial time-close to the projected end of the world-fuelled the delusions of group members.
- Many of the participants in the Milgram experiment (1963) on obedience to authority (Box 25.2) experienced high levels of stress and anxiety as a consequence of being incited to administer electric shocks. It could also be argued that Milgram's

should be disclosed, to whom, and how should this be done?' (2001: 455). Thus, the important injunction to protect confidentiality may create dilemmas for the researcher that are by no means easy to resolve.

One of the problems with the harm-to-participants principle is that it is not possible to identify in all circumstances whether harm is likely, though that fact should not be taken to mean that there is no point in seeking to protect them. Kimmel (1988) notes in this connection the example of the Cambridge-Summerville Youth Study. In 1939, an experiment was conducted on boys aged 5–13 who were either identified as likely to become delinquent or who were average in this regard. The 506 boys were equally divided in terms of this characteristic. They were randomly assigned to either an experimental group in which they received preventative counselling or to a no-treatment control group. In the mid-1970s, the records were re-examined and were quite shocking: 'Treated subjects were more likely than controls to evidence signs of alcoholism and serious mental illness, died at a younger age, suffered from more stress-related diseases, tended to be employed in lower-prestige occupations, and were more likely to commit second crimes' (Kimmel 1988: 19).

In other words, the treatment brought about a train of negative consequences for the group. This is an extreme example and relates to experimental research, which is not a research design that is commonly employed in social research (see Chapter 2), but it does illustrate the difficulty of anticipating harm to respondents. The ASA *Codes of Ethics* suggests that, if there is any prospect of harm to participants, informed consent, the focus of the next section, is essential: 'Informed consent must be obtained when the risks of research are greater than the risks of everyday life. Where modest risk or harm is anticipated, informed consent must be obtained.'

Lack of informed consent

The issue of informed consent is in many respects the area within social research ethics that is most hotly debated. The bulk of the discussion tends to focus on what is variously called disguised or covert observation. Such observation can involve covert participant observation (Box 14.3), or simple or contrived observation (Box 8.5), in which the researcher's true identity is unknown. The principle means that prospective research participants should be given as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate in a study. Covert observation transgresses that principle, because participants are not given the opportunity to refuse to cooperate. They are involved whether they like it or not.

Lack of informed consent is a feature of the research in Boxes 25.1 and 25.2. In Humphreys's research informed consent is absent, because the men for whom he acted as a watchqueen were not given the opportunity to refuse participation in his investigation. Similar points can be made about several other studies previously encountered in this book, such as Festinger *et al.* (1956); Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968); Patrick (1973); Rosenhan (1973); Fielding (1981, 1982); and Holdaway (1982, 1983). The principle of informed consent also entails the implication that, even when people know they are being asked to participate in research, they should be fully informed about the research process. As the SRA *Ethical Guidelines* suggests:

> Inquiries involving human subjects should be based as far as practicable on the freely given informed consent of subjects. Even if participation is required by law, it should still be as informed as possible. In voluntary inquiries, subjects should not be under the impression that they are required to participate. They should be aware of their entitlement to refuse at any stage for whatever reason and to withdraw data just supplied. Information that would be likely to affect a subject's willingness to participate should not be deliberately withheld, since this would remove from subjects an important means of protecting their own interests.

Similarly, the BSA *Statement* says:

> As far as possible sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the sociologist to explain as fully as possible, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the

research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be promoted.

Thus, while Milgram's experimental subjects were volunteers and therefore knew they were going to participate in research, there is a lack of informed consent, because they were not given full information about the nature of the research and its possible implications for them.

However, as Homan (1991: 73) has observed, implementing the principle of informed consent 'is easier said than done'. At least two major points stand out here.

- It is extremely difficult to present prospective participants with absolutely all the information that might be required to make an informed decision about their involvement. In fact, relatively minor transgressions probably pervade most social research, such as deliberately under-estimating the amount of time that an interview is likely to take so that people are not put off being interviewed and not giving absolutely all the details about one's research for fear of contaminating people's answers to questions.
- In ethnographic research, the researcher is likely to come into contact with a wide spectrum of people, and ensuring that absolutely everyone has the opportunity for informed consent is not practicable, because it would be extremely disruptive in everyday contexts. For example, recall the extract from Punch's field notes (1979) from his research on the police in Amsterdam, quoted on page 333, in which a suspect was apprehended and the ethnographer was represented by the police officers as a fellow police officer. It was not feasible to inform the individual of the fact that Punch was in fact a researcher and to notify him of his rights in relation to the research. Similarly, in the passage from Punch's field notes in Box 14.12, the meandering cyclist could not be given the opportunity for informed consent. Punch was not a disguised participant observer so far as the police were concerned, but *was* disguised in connection with many of those with whom the police had encounters in the course of his fieldwork. Also, even when all research participants in a certain setting are aware that the ethnographer is a researcher, it is doubtful whether they are all similarly (let alone identically) informed about the nature of the research.

In spite of the widespread condemnation of violations of informed consent and the view that covert observation is especially vulnerable to accusations of unethical practice in this regard, studies using the method still appear periodically (e.g. Fielding 1982; S. Taylor 1999). The defence is usually of the 'end-justifies-the-means' kind, which is further discussed below. What is interesting in this present context is that the BSA *Statement* essentially leaves the door ajar for covert observation. The phrase 'as far as possible' regarding informed consent in the last quotation from the *Statement* does this, but they then go even further in relation to covert research:

> 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 behaviour 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 it should be obtained post-hoc.

While this statement hardly condones the absence of informed consent associated with covert research, it is not unequivocally censorious either. It recognizes that covert research 'may avoid certain problems' and refers, without using the term, to the possibility of reactivity associated with overt observational methods. It also recognizes that covert methods can help to get over the difficulty of gaining access to certain kinds of setting. The passage entails an acknowledgement that informed consent is jeopardized, along with the privacy principle (see below), but implies that covert research can be used 'where it is impossible to use other methods to obtain essential data'. The difficulty here clearly is how a researcher is to decide whether it is in fact impossible to obtain data other than by covert work. I suspect that, by and large, covert observers typically make their judgements in this connection on the basis of the *anticipated* difficulty of gaining access to a setting or of encountering reactivity problems, rather than as a response to difficulties they have actually experienced. For example, Holdaway (1982: 63) has written that, as a police officer, his only alternatives to covert participant observation were either equally unethical (but less desirable) or 'unrealistic'. Similarly, Homan justified his use of covert participant observation of a religious sect on the grounds that sociologists were viewed very negatively by group members and therefore: 'It seemed probable that the prevalence of such a perception would prejudice the effectiveness of a fieldworker declaring an identity as sociologist' (Homan and Bulmer 1982: 107). The issue of the circumstances in which violations of ethical principles, like informed consent, are deemed acceptable will reappear in the discussion below.

The principle of informed consent is also bound up to some extent with the issue of harm to participants. Erikson has suggested that, if the principle is not followed and if participants are harmed as a result of the research, the investigator is more culpable than if they did not know. For example, he writes: 'If we happen to harm people who have agreed to act as subjects, we can at least argue that they knew something of the risks involved . . .' (Erikson 1967: 369). While this might seem like a recipe for seeking a salve for the sociologist's conscience, it does point to an important issue—namely, that the social researcher is more likely to be vilified if participants are adversely affected when they were not willing accomplices, than when they were. However, it is debatable whether that means that the researcher is any less culpable for that harm. Erikson implies they are less culpable, but this is a potential area for disagreement.

Invasion of privacy

This third area of ethical concern relates to the issue of the degree to which invasions of privacy can be condoned. The right to privacy is a tenet that many of us hold dear, and transgressions of that right in the name of research are not regarded as acceptable. It is very much linked to the notion of informed consent, because, to the degree that informed consent is given on the basis of a detailed understanding of what the research participant's involvement is likely to entail, he or she in a sense acknowledges that the right to privacy has been surrendered for that limited domain. The ASA *Codes of Ethics* makes a direct link: 'Sociologists should take culturally appropriate steps to secure informed consent and to avoid invasions of privacy.' Of course, the research participant does not abrogate the right to privacy entirely by providing informed consent. As we have seen, when people agree to be interviewed, they will frequently refuse to answer certain questions on whatever grounds they feel are justified. Often, these refusals will be based on a feeling that certain questions delve into private realms, which respondents do not wish to make public, regardless of the fact that the interview is in private. Examples might be questions about income, religious beliefs, or sexual activities.

Covert methods are usually deemed to be violations of the privacy principle on the grounds that participants are not being given the opportunity to refuse invasions of their privacy. Such methods also mean that they might reveal confidences or information that they would not have revealed if they had known about the status of the confidant as researcher. The issue of privacy is invariably linked to issues of anonymity and confidentiality in the research process, an area that has already been touched on in the context of the question of whether harm comes to participants. The BSA *Statement* forges this kind of connection: 'The anonymity and privacy of those who participate in the research process should be respected. Personal information concerning research participants should be kept confidential. In some cases it may be necessary to decide whether it is proper or appropriate to record certain kinds of sensitive information.'

Raising issues about ensuring anonymity and confidentiality in relation to the recording of information and the maintenance of records relates to all methods of social research. In other words, while covert research may pose certain kinds of problem regarding the invasion of privacy, other methods of social research are implicated in possible difficulties in connection with anonymity and confidentiality. This was clearly the case with the Springfield research (Vidich and Bensman 1968), which was based on open participant observation. The issue here was that the absence of safeguards concerning the protection of the identity of some members of the community meant that certain matters about them came into the public domain that should have remained private.

Deception

Deception occurs when researchers represent their research as something other than what it is. The two studies by Milgram referred to in Box 25.2 involve deception. In the obedience-to-authority experiment, participants are led to believe they are administering real electric shocks. In the lost-letter study, deception occurs because people who place the lost letters in a mail box, so that they will be sent to their destinations, believe they are sending letters that have been accidentally lost rather than ones that have been deposited for a social psychological experiment. Deception in various degrees is probably quite widespread in such research, because researchers often want to limit participants' understanding of what the research is about so that they respond more naturally to the experimental treatment.

However, deception is by no means the exclusive preserve of social psychology experiments. E. Goode (1996), for example, placed four fake and slightly different dating advertisements in periodicals. He received nearly 1,000 replies and was able to conduct a content analysis of them. Several of the studies we have already encountered entail deception: Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) deceived teachers into believing that particular children in their charge were likely to excel at school, when they had in fact been randomly selected; Festinger *et al.* (1956) deceived cult members that they were in fact real converts; Rosenhan's (1973) associates deceived admissions staff at mental hospitals that they were mentally ill; and Holdaway (1982) deceived his superiors and peers that he was functioning solely as a police officer.

The ethical objection to deception seems to turn on two points. First, it is not a nice thing to do. While the SRA *Guidelines* recognizes that deception is widespread in social interaction, it is hardly desirable. Secondly, there is the question of professional self-interest. If social researchers became known as snoopers who deceived people as a matter of professional course, the image of our work would be adversely affected and we might experience difficulty in gaining financial support and the cooperation of future prospective research participants. As the SRA *Guidelines* puts it: 'It remains the duty of social researchers and their collaborators, however, not to pursue methods of inquiry that are likely to infringe human values and sensibilities. To do so, whatever the methodological advantages, would be to endanger the reputation of social research and the mutual trust between social researchers and society which is a prerequisite for much research.' Similarly, Erikson (1967: 369) has argued that disguised observation 'is liable to damage the reputation of sociology in the larger society and close off promising areas of research for future investigators'.

One of the chief problems with the discussion of this aspect of ethics is that deception is, as some writers observe, widespread in social research (see the stance, *Ethical transgression is pervasive*, in Box 25.3). It is rarely feasible or desirable to provide participants with a totally complete account of what your research is about. As Punch (1979) found in the incidents referred to above, he could hardly announce to the youth or the meandering cyclist that he was not in fact a police officer and then launch into a lengthy account of his research. Bulmer (1982), whose stance is predominantly that of a universalist in ethics terms (see Box 25.3), nonetheless recognizes that there are bound to be instances such as this and deems them justifiable. However, it is very difficult to know where the line should be drawn here.