

# Ethics in research



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HERE] Social Research Ethics, Preliminary Thoughts The alone McIntyre's article about doing the right thing in conducting social research (2002) suggests another, first-order matter not to be dismissed easily. Is it ever possible to know if a researcher has done, or is doing, the right thing? In considering this matter, I found I could work with the following questions to come up with some preliminary if tentative thoughts. Here are these presented with the idea that they might lead to a greater insight into social research ethics and the ultimate concern McIntyre's article rests upon.

One: " Is it possible for anyone to genuinely consent to being objectified through the research process?" (Davidson). Two: Do voluntary participation, informed consent, risk of harm, confidentiality, and anonymity (Trochim) pretty much cover the bases for ethical research on human subjects?

Whether quantitative or qualitative research approaches are employed to study human phenomena, the knowledge quest rests on the thing of the quest--the object of study. Whether researchers, ethics committees, the public, or others like it or not, human subjects become objects in the service of discovering, confirming, or advancing knowledge.

Objectification comes with all that is the research enterprise. If, however, in a clinical or confidential study, a subject, or we can now say object, is not treated per proper procedure and respect, there may be cause for complaint. Any ethics violation may then have to be determined by those closest to what was actually proposed and done.

Davidson's question seems more philosophical than practical. It may not be nice or politically correct to objectify people in some ideal world or in some contexts, but in the end for research we do it, just as we do it elsewhere in our lives (e. g., picture the finals in a body building competition).

Voluntary participation, informed consent, risk of harm, confidentiality, and anonymity are not the only matters for care in planning and conducting research involving human subjects. No doubt any ethics committee or listing of standards, rules, or procedures would specify these and others, and in some detail. However, there is at least one additional base to cover regardless of the group to be satisfied or the expectations to be met. The expectation or standard should be articulated that ethics should be addressed whenever researching human subjects. This may seem redundant, but if not stated in whatever fashion the governing or advisory body wishes to, not having some self-referential language about the advisability or requirement of the process itself has a possible negative consequence. For example, if there is no process, the possible claim above of violation could not be addressed except out of good citizenship or manners involving those closest to the action. Another possibility is that if researchers as a group do not "require" the process of reviewing the ethics of what is proposed, a researcher need not review. If review is required, then the substance and process of research, its approval, and--it is hoped--research implementation will help ensure the proper treatment and care of those studied.

By and large, research today is not carried out by independent researchers. It is sanctioned by higher education by having research and publication as a part of the academic's job description. Grants and contracts routinely require as much quality and transparency as is humanly possible, or affordable. The public can scrutinize pharmaceutical companies and governments when their work involves health and the common good. The researcher or sponsor that does not adhere to ethical precepts risks being ignored by an academy with

the almost universal norm of doing so.

There are some research studies that need to be covert, that is the object of study need not or should not be disclosed beforehand. Disclosing might in these cases bias results. This seems to contradict the principle of informed consent, but this depends. An ethnographic study might be an example exception. If a cultural informant knows he or she is being viewed as such, results might be other than what would be without this knowledge. Margaret Mead got into this difficulty with the subjects of her classic study (2001). Degree of disclosure as an ethical expectation needs to be carefully worked out for each social research study, for the integrity of the study as well as the protection of the subjects.

Now, given all of the above, is it ever possible to know if a researcher has done the right thing? It appears that as much as we prescribe and proscribe trying to ensure that we do right in social research, it appears as if the answer is akin to the imperfection we accept in our lives. However, there is a difference. In social (and other) research, we would try to be extra deliberate and careful about achieving incontrovertible explanations and understandings, reducing the chances of making errors and doing wrong. Otherwise, what are we trying to accomplish?

#### Works Cited

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Mead, Margaret. *Coming of Age in Samoa*. New York: Perennial Classics, 2001.

Trochim, William M. K. "Ethics in Research." *Research Methods Knowledge Base*. 2006 25. Nov. 2008

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