

EXERCISE 6.2

410'

OBJECTIVE: To enhance students' writing skills through regular practice.

DESCRIPTION: Practice your writing skills by starting a diary called *Stories of The Day*. Everyday record an interesting event that happened to you or someone you know. Write these stories as if you were verbally sharing them with an audience. Make your descriptions detailed and clear. Don't assume your audience is familiar with the characters and the settings.

EXERCISE 6.3

OBJECTIVES: To encourage students to solicit feedback from their peers and to evaluate their writing based on how well it is understood by others.

DESCRIPTION: Ask someone to read aloud a short paper you wrote for a class. Pay attention to how they might struggle with your sentences or writing style. Take notes on things you can correct to make your paper sound better. Make these corrections and ask your friend to reread the paper. How has your paper improved?

7**Ethics in Qualitative Research**

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In investigating people's experiences, the researcher enters a relationship with those she or he studies. The ethics of social research have to do with the nature of the researcher's responsibilities in this relationship, or the things that should or should not be done regarding the people being observed and written about. This is not significantly different from what we do in other relationships. We try to be polite, treat people with respect, and don't do or say anything that will harm them. Good manners are a good beginning, but actual research scenarios may require guidelines that go beyond common courtesy. My own fieldwork at a homeless shelter presented a number of ethical dilemmas.

For example, there was Gregory (pseudonyms are used here to protect the identities of respondents). He was a middle-aged white man who lived on the streets near the shelter. Gregory was a talented poet and author who suffered from alcoholism. As we became more familiar with each other, he began asking me to buy him beer. So as a matter of courtesy, from time to time I paid for his bar tab. Unfortunately, Gregory's drinking became worse and his requests for money to support his habit became more frequent and direct. He started leaving messages on my home answering machine begging me to meet him at a bar to pay his tab. I finally decided that it was unethical for me to support his addiction and stopped helping him. The next phone call I received

from Gregory was from a local jail where he was being held for shoplifting a bottle of beer from a convenience store. He wanted me to make arrangements for his legal defense. I went to visit Gregory at the jail and told him there was very little I could do for him. Several weeks later he was released and subsequently left for New York City. I did not hear from him again.

During my research, I also met a homeless man named Tony. He was in his mid-twenties and had a passion for movie making. Since part of my project involved videotaping interviews with the street people around the shelter, I asked Tony if he would operate the camcorder while I asked questions from the respondents. He accepted my request and took the work very seriously. On one occasion, I asked Tony to help me edit some of our raw footage into a short documentary. We showed the work to a group of college students at a gathering in support of the homeless. It was well received and Tony was delighted to be part of the project.

Tony also acted as my informant, taking me to places where the homeless spent their time. To return the favor, I helped Tony fill out his applications for a local college and gave him advice on applying for government-subsidized financial aid. As I saw it, this was a fair arrangement where we both benefited, but I gradually realized that Tony believed his participation in my research would help him become an independent filmmaker. At one point, he suggested that we edit the tapes into a short independent film about the homeless. I did not object to his ambitions but thought that his expectations about our collaborations were unrealistic. So I gently reminded him that I was mainly collecting data for a dissertation. If he were hurt by this, he hid it well. His interest in my work dissipated over time. Tony eventually secured a job at a local movie theater as an usher. On the occasional Saturday night when I went to see a movie where he worked, Tony would get my attention from a distance by shouting, 'Hey, when are we going to work on that film together?' I would smile and say with embarrassment, 'I don't know.'

Thinking about these stories may cause you to wonder if you would have handled these situations differently. Is it possible that I was not forthcoming enough about the purpose of my research with Tony? Perhaps I was too involved with Gregory and should have severed my ties with him much earlier. The point of these stories for the present discussion is that qualitative research involves working with people and making ethical choices about how to treat them. In this chapter, we will discuss some of the central issues related to ethics in qualitative research. I begin by learning about the basic principles that concern all researchers when working with human participants. I then discuss how informed consent documents are developed and administered in order to protect research participants and end this chapter by considering the limitations of the informed consent protocol as employed in qualitative research.

The basic principles

Today most researchers, regardless of their discipline or methodological orientation, recognize that when working with human subjects (as opposed to cultural

artifacts or objects), certain steps must be taken to protect the dignity and safety of the research participants. However, the wide acceptance and implementation of this ethical awareness is a relatively new development. As recently as the 1970s, highly unethical social and medical studies were being conducted in the United States. In one of the most troubling examples of unscrupulous research, a group of 399 African-American men afflicted with syphilis unknowingly became participants in a medical experiment (Jones 1981: 1-23). From the 1930s to 1970s, the physicians assigned to these men deliberately did not treat them for their ailment, even after penicillin was developed and could have been used as a cure. Instead, the patients were secretly experimented on to examine the effects of untreated syphilis. By the time this U.S. Public Health Service study was exposed and subsequently terminated, many of the patients whose condition had gone untreated for years had either died horribly or become more severely ill.

Instances of unethical research are not limited to medical experiments. Among social scientists in the United States, a well-known example of unethical research is Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade* (1970). Humphreys studied anonymous homosexual encounters in semi-public places. Specifically, he was interested in the background of men who had sex with other men in public restrooms. After positioning himself in a restroom in a city park, he gained the trust of the men who frequented it by acting as a lookout for them while they engaged in sexual activities. Humphreys secretly recorded their license plate numbers, and with the help of the police discovered who they were and where they lived. Months later, he visited the men in their homes disguised as a medical survey researcher. He gathered additional information about these men and their families and subsequently published his research in a book that was widely praised before questions were raised about its ethics. One of the main findings of his work was that many of the men in his study were married and of middle class background - a discovery that was made possible through the covert invasion of the subjects' privacy.

Such flagrant abuses of research subjects in the name of science have led to the establishment of specific codes of conduct. While these may vary across disciplines and national boundaries, there are a number of general principles that most researchers would agree with. The following presents a brief review of these principles (i.e., voluntary participation, protection of research participants, potential benefit to participants and guidelines on the use of deception).

Voluntary participation

Participation in a research project should be voluntary; you should not psychologically or physically force your subjects to take part in your research. Let us consider a number of scenarios that run the risk of violating this principle. Suppose a sociologist, Professor Johnson, asks his students to fill out a short-answer questionnaire for a course on social stratification and poverty. The required assignment involves writing about your personal or family experiences with poverty. You are supposed to answer questions like: 'Have you and your family ever experienced economic hardship? If so, describe how you felt about

it?,' 'In your view, what has been the psychological impact of such an experience on you?,' and 'If you have not personally experienced financial difficulties, you may answer these questions about a relative or an acquaintance.' Professor Johnson informs that excerpts from the survey questionnaires will be used anonymously for a research project about college students' attitudes toward poverty. Has the principle of voluntary participation been violated in this case?

Some would say the answer is yes. Given that the assignment is required, the students' decision not to participate most certainly will hurt their grades. They *have to* participate regardless of how they feel about their personal accounts being used for research purposes. On the other hand, if Professor Johnson offered several assignment choices, only one of which was the autobiographical one, then the decision to partake in the project is voluntary. Alternatively, Johnson might make the research voluntary by announcing that the answers may not be used without your consent.

Similarly, the principle of voluntary participation can be violated when you lure the indigent into a study by offering them monetary rewards. For example, to get an interview with a homeless person, a researcher might offer them five dollars. Is this ethical? Many would argue that it isn't because asking the poor to participate in a study in exchange for money is the moral equivalent of asking a starving person to answer a few questions in exchange for a plate of food. What is the solution? One possibility is to solicit interviews without any rewards. Another approach is to contact their service providers and ask if they know of anyone who is willing to be interviewed.

How about when you are observing people in public places such as malls or restaurants? Do you need to approach each patron for permission to observe them? The general consensus is that what people do in public places is by definition there for all to observe. The same guideline applies to public statements. If in a published newspaper editorial I refer to my personal experiences, you don't need my permission to use words that are already public domain (obviously, you have to cite the author and the source). What if the interviewee is a child or someone who is mentally incapacitated? In these cases, the recommendation is to gain consent from a parent or a guardian before proceeding with the research.

As these examples indicate, it is sometimes difficult to assess the degree to which the subjects' participation is completely voluntary. While a strictly legalistic interpretation of the phrase 'voluntary participation' might be useful in some cases, you may ultimately have to rely on your own judgment and sense of morality to determine if the person you are researching is fully aware of the implications of their involvement in your study.

Protection of the research participants

Even if your respondents voluntarily take part in your study, they may not be in a position to fully appreciate the potential harm they could suffer from their participation. For example, after obtaining permission from members of a support group for the chronically depressed, a researcher proceeds to conduct

interviews about the sources of their mental illness. One of the questions that comes up during the interview is whether or not the respondent has been a victim of child abuse. Specifically, the researcher asks, 'Have you been sexually or physically abused by a relative or an acquaintance? If so, please describe how this happened and when?' Suppose the respondent tries to answer this question and in the process has to recall a very painful past. After the interview, the respondent becomes even more depressed and tries to commit suicide. Is the researcher to blame for this unfortunate event, given that the participation was completely voluntary?

In this example, it is likely that the respondent did not know the consequences of participating in the study. Given the sensitive nature of child abuse, perhaps our researcher should have taken precautionary steps to terminate the interview if the respondent appeared overly emotional. At the very least, the research participants should have been informed in advance about the types of questions they would be asked and reminded that they have the option not to answer certain questions or to end the interview whenever they wish. In theory, researchers should take every reasonable measure to protect their subjects from harm, but in reality, it is impossible to anticipate every risk. One reason for this is that your study might affect respondents in different ways. In the example above, for some participants talking about their past might indeed be therapeutic, whereas for others it might be traumatic. In the end, it is your responsibility as a researcher to minimize potential harm as much as possible. This means that in some cases you may have to abandon your research idea altogether because the risk of harm is too great. For example, psychologists may find it very interesting to study the effect of social isolation on children as this would teach us a great deal about the importance of socialization. However, the thought of separating innocent children from all their loved ones is unconscionable no matter what the scientific merit of the study.

Confidentiality and anonymity

An important part of protecting your research subjects is guarding their privacy; revealing the identities of your respondents could harm them. For example, if you were researching homosexual couples who preferred to keep their lifestyle secret from their relatives, disclosing their names would seriously damage their family relationships. Or suppose you were interviewing high school students about drug use and they reported that they experimented with marijuana. If your respondents were exposed, they could be expelled from school and possibly face legal charges. Privacy is also a concern when dealing with more conventional topics. For example, in an ethnography of a hospital, the nurses might disclose their opinions about the physicians they work with. A nurse might gripe about how a certain doctor is always late for her/his appointments. Revealing the respondent's identity in this case may result in her/his dismissal from work.

Confidentiality and anonymity are two aspects of the privacy issue. Confidentiality means that the identity of the respondent will not be disclosed to anyone. So when you refer to a particular research participant in your writing, as I did earlier in this chapter when discussing Gregory and Tony, you keep their identities hidden by using fictional names. You should also try to disguise other identifying information, such as where they live or work. For example, if you are doing your research in Gainesville, Florida, you might refer to the location as 'a small city in the southeastern United States.' Or if your data was collected at a hospital named Bethesda Memorial, you should change the name to something like 'Clairmount Memorial.' Overall, confidentiality implies that, except for the researcher, no one else will know the identity of the participants.

Anonymity means that even the researcher does not know the identity of the respondents. In qualitative studies where you observe people in various settings and interview them face-to-face, complete anonymity is impossible – in most cases you meet research participants in person. Nevertheless, certain steps can be taken toward providing subjects with limited anonymity. For example, if the interviews are taped, do not label the cassettes with the respondents' actual names. Either use fictional names or organize your tapes using randomly assigned numbers. Similarly, you can create a set of pseudonyms for all your research participants and use them in your notes instead of their real names. It is likely that over time you forget what their real names were and remember them only by the fictional names you assign to them.

Benefit to the research participants

We rely on research respondents to provide the raw material for our analysis and reports. They share with us their time and social experiences, but usually they are not financially compensated for their contributions. So, how do we pay them back? The ethical concern here is to ensure that the research-subject relationship is mutually beneficial. We don't want to exploit subjects or respondents, taking from them without giving anything back. To make this arrangement more equitable, the research project could be designed in a way that benefits the subjects and their communities.

For example, let's say you plan to study how children construct ethnic or racial identities for themselves and others by positioning yourself at a daycare center as a volunteer and observing how children interact with one another on the playground, which is precisely what Van Ausdale and Feagin did in their book *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* (2002). Their study provides disturbing, but eye-opening, accounts of how young children use racist epithets in reference to their peers. How was this project beneficial to the research participants? Van Ausdale and Feagin reason that in the end their work indirectly benefits the children by informing parents and educators about potential problems with the way their charges learn about and practice race and ethnicity.

Sociological studies that more explicitly encourage respondents' full participation in all phases of the research process with the goal of bettering their lives are referred to as 'participatory research.' As Small notes:

Participatory researchers are openly and explicitly political. Their ideology emphasizes large-scale structural forces, conflicts of interest, and the need to overcome oppression and inequality through transforming the existing social order. The lack of access to useful and valued forms of knowledge by oppressed or disenfranchised people is viewed as a major problem that can be overcome through the research process. (1995: 944)

As a whole, qualitative studies can be beneficial in three important ways (Silverman 2001: 271–81). First, they could help increase awareness, and stimulate debate, about public policies. Research on the health care system, for example, has provided much useful information about needed improvements. Second, qualitative research could make people more aware of their choices. In the example above, Van Ausdale and Feagin's research encourages another choice for constructing children's racial identities, one that is more inclusive and tolerant. Finally, qualitative research provides 'new perspectives' on old problems. For example, my research questions the conventional profile of 'the homeless' as being helpless victims of poverty, mental illness, and drug abuse. I suggest that contrary to these stereotypical representations, some homeless people make rational choices about their lives, particularly in regard to where and how they receive social services (Marvasti 2003).

The ethical principles of voluntary participation and protecting and benefiting the participants are sometimes addressed through a formal protocol, which is briefly reviewed in the next section.

The informed consent model

To address these basic ethical issues in working with human subjects, sometimes researchers use what is referred to as an *informed consent*. This includes written or verbal statements that provide research participants with a general description of the research project along with its potential harms and benefits. Some academic institutions in the United States ask all researchers to make use of the informed consent protocol under the guidelines of the office of Institutional Review Boards (IRB). An IRB is a committee composed of representatives from various departments in a university and is charged with reviewing all research projects involving human subjects. Before allowing a study to proceed, IRB might request further clarification or changes to the design and implementation of the research. Let us consider the elements of a written informed consent.

Developing a written consent form

A written consent form should address all the ethical concerns introduced earlier in this chapter. Namely, it should emphasize that:

- Participation is voluntary.
- No harm will come to the participants (if there is any risk of harm, it should be clearly described).
- The participants' privacy will be protected (steps that will be taken to ensure protection of privacy should be listed specifically).

Think of the informed consent as a contract that specifies your ethical responsibilities to the respondents. If your research is conducted under the auspices of an academic institution in the United States and the IRB has approved your project, violations of the informed consent agreement may have legal ramifications for you and your school.

Below is an example of an informed consent form from a study that my colleague and I developed for our research on Middle Eastern Americans.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Middle Eastern Lives in the United States

- 1 *Purpose of the study:* The purpose of this study is to bring to light the existence of Middle Easterners in America and to show the human complexity of their lives. The work gives special attention to how members of this ethnic group cope with, resist and combat discrimination.
- 2 *Procedures to be followed:* We request that you answer a number of in-depth questions in this audiotaped focus group or interview. Afterwards, you will be asked to complete a short survey questionnaire. We expect your entire participation will take approximately 90 minutes.
- 3 *Discomforts and risks:* As with any research study, the only possible discomfort you might experience from participation in this study is that you could be uncomfortable answering certain questions. For this reason, you may decline to answer any or all of our questions, or you may stop participating at any time.
- 4 *Benefits:* This is an opportunity for Middle Easterners like yourself to present a balanced and unbiased perspective on their lives.
- 5 *Statement of confidentiality:* Your participation in this research is confidential. Only the researchers will have access to the audiotape and transcription of your interview along with any other information that discloses your identity in this research project. All these materials will be stored at Dr. Marvasti's residence and will be destroyed by the end of the year 2003. No identifying labels will be attached to the audiotape (the audiotape will not be associated with your identity). Also, in the event of publication of this research, no personally identifying information will be disclosed. Your name will be changed to an alias in any publications or reports, and any details which might identify you will also be removed.
- 6 *Right to ask questions:* You can ask questions about the research. The people in charge will answer your questions. Contact Dr. Marvasti or Dr. McKinney.
- 7 *Voluntary participation:* Your participation is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You may end your participation at any time without penalty by telling the researchers.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participation in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. (Adapted from Marvasti and McKinney, forthcoming)

Before each interview, we present our respondents with a more expanded version of this form. Without the respondents' signature and approval, we do not proceed. The people contacted for our study have expressed that they are comfortable with the safeguards that are put in place for their protection. However, such contractual agreements are not without problems. The next discussion considers some of these shortcomings.

The limitations of the informed consent model as applied to qualitative research

The informed consent approach is very useful in specifying ethical boundaries for researchers. However, these guidelines are based on the assumptions of quantitative, survey research, where questions are asked from a known sample with very little variation from one respondent to another. The problem is that in qualitative research sometimes the interview questions and the focus of the project itself changes in the course of the study. Depending on the circumstances, one interview may be very different from another. This is especially true for in-depth interviews in which follow-up questions emerge spontaneously in reaction to respondent's comments. Since one cannot anticipate the exact direction the interview will take, it is impossible to inform fully the respondent about the focus of the study in advance. Similar problems arise in ethnographic studies (see Chapter 3), where in the course of your observations, you come in contact with many people in many settings. In general, in the context of qualitative research, two factors impede the full implementation of informed consent guidelines:

1. it may be difficult to define precisely the characteristics and number of research participants in advance, and
2. the focus of the study and the related research questions may undergo changes over the course of the project.

These challenges have led some qualitative researchers to raise fundamental questions about the feasibility of informed consent. For example, Lawton (2002), in her study of dying patients at a hospice (a medical/residential facility designed for the care of the terminally ill), underscores the many ethical concerns that informed consent guidelines fail to address. Specifically, she asks how informed is informed consent? Lawton makes the case that many of the dying patients she studied were not alert enough to fully understand the purpose of her research. At the same time, she notes that it may be necessary to continually remind research participants of the informed consent agreement since in prolonged studies, such as ethnographies, the participants may be observed many times in many situations for different purposes.

Overall, while the principles of informing and protecting respondents play a significant role in quantitative and qualitative research, there may be differences in the way these guidelines are implemented for the two approaches. Quantitative research is more inductive, it starts with a set of clearly stated

TABLE 7.1 *Silverman's three research roles*

Role	Politics	Commitment
Scholar	Liberal	Knowledge for knowledge's sake, protected by scholar's conscience
State counselor	Bureaucratic	Social engineering or enlightenment for policymakers
Partisan	Leftwing Rightwing	Knowledge to support both a political theory and political practice

Source: adapted from Silverman 2001: 261

questions and hypotheses and proceeds to data collection and analysis. Consequently, quantitative or survey researchers are in a position to inform their respondents from the start about exactly what they plan to study and how. By contrast, qualitative research tends to be more deductive, proceeding from observations to general statements. For qualitative researchers, it is more difficult to completely inform participants about the purpose and the specific direction of the inquiries at the onset of the research project.

Research roles and audiences

Should researchers allow personal or political values to enter their work? In this regard, according to Silverman (2001: 259–66), sociologists can assume three different roles. First, there is the position of the 'scholar.' In this capacity, the researcher is interested in science for the sake of science and judges the study's relevance and ethics based on his or her own moral principles. As Silverman suggests, this position is best represented by Max Weber, who 'insisted on the primacy of the individual's conscience as a basis for action' (2001: 261). The second research role is that of a 'state counselor.' Here, the goal is to work closely with interested policymakers. In this role, sociologists might be viewed as social engineers who assist state bureaucrats in a joint effort to create a 'better' society. Finally, there is the 'partisan' role, where the sociologist sides with a particular group. In Silverman's words, 'the partisan seeks to provide the theoretical and factual resources for a political struggle aimed at transforming the assumptions through which both political and administrative games are played' (2001: 265). The partisan role is best captured in an often quoted statement by Becker in which he asks sociologists, 'Whose side are we on?' (Becker 1967: 239). For Becker, sociologists should take the side of the 'underdogs,' or the oppressed. Table 7.1 summarizes Silverman's three research roles.

As an alternative to the question 'whose side are we on?' Silverman asks, who is our audience? He argues that the three roles listed above tend to ignore the more practical aspects of social research. For him, research is a social practice,

TABLE 7.2 *Audiences and their expectations*

Audience	Expectations
Academic Colleagues	Theoretical, factual or methodological insights
Policymakers	Practical information relevant to current policy issues
Practitioners	A theoretical framework for understanding clients better; factual information; practical suggestions for better procedures; reform of existing practices
The general public	New facts; ideas for reform of current practices or policies; guidelines for how to manage better or get better service from practitioners or institutions; assurances that others share their own experiences of particular problems in life

Source: Strauss and Corbin 1990: 242–43, as cited in Silverman 2001: 267

one that emerges in a particular social context for a particular purpose. Silverman returns our attention to the practical goals of research by underscoring how different types of research meet the needs of different audiences, such as academics, policymakers, practitioners, and the general public. Accordingly, as seen in Table 7.2, each audience has its own expectations about the value and utility of research and, therefore, makes different demands about what issues should be addressed by researchers.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter reviewed the ethics of social research as they apply to qualitative methods. These ethics can loosely be defined as the dos and don'ts of how we treat our research participants. A number of general principles were described. It was emphasized that we should ensure that participation is voluntary, no harm comes to the respondents, the research is of some benefit to the participants, and that their privacy will be protected. One way of addressing all these concerns is through the informed consent process whereby verbal or written statements are shared with research participants to inform them about the topic of the study, its potential benefit or harm, and the specific steps taken to guard their privacy. Some limitations of the informed consent guidelines were briefly discussed. In particular, I argued that in qualitative research it is difficult to fully describe the study to the respondents from the start, because the questions and themes emerge deductively over time. I concluded the chapter with Silverman's three research roles: the scholar, the state counselor, and the partisan, and suggested that as an alternative to asking 'whose side are we on?' researchers could consider the specific audience for whom they are writing.