

Ethical issues and considerations

Jon Swain

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Box 5.1 Overview of chapter

This chapter includes information on:

- Writing an ethical review.
- The role of Research Ethics Committees.
- Ethical guides/frameworks.
- Key ethical principles.
- Research using the Internet.

[End box]

5.1 Introduction

The chapter provides a contribution to discussions on the ethics involved in social and educational research. Each of the four main research designs, or approaches, in this book have different sets of ethical principles and priorities but, in general, qualitative researchers face more challenging issues than those using more quantitative approaches (which are characteristic of positivist epistemologies), and some of these are concerned with the ability to respond to contingent events within localised contexts. Therefore, ethical issues are more likely to occur and arise in ethnographic or case study research, which have flexible, fluent, designs than in experimental designs or surveys.

The term 'ethics' usually refers to the moral principles or rules of conduct, which are held by a group or profession that guide the conduct of the research, whether it be sociologists, psychologists, medical doctors or others. Ethical issues are not always clear-cut but are often complex and sometimes a researcher needs to balance a whole range of conflicting issues. Decisions about ethical matters will also involve the researcher's own world view, in other words their ontology, epistemology, values and so on, as well as their disciplinary assumptions and methodological position.

Over the last decade or so, there has been an ever-increasing interest in, and attention paid to, the ethics of educational and social science research, and the responsibilities that researchers have to their participants, fellow members of the research community, and to the institution where they work in and/or study have been made increasingly clear. This follows a number of controversial ethical cases in social research and in medicine, and more details of these appear in a number of textbooks (e.g., Robson, 2011; Thomas, 2013; and on [WEBLINK 1](#)). A number of key principles have evolved that have become expectations of what constitutes professional, ethical, behaviour and practice and these are discussed further in Section 5.5.

There has been a general move away from the authority and status of the researcher, and where previously they were seen more as an expert who was able to make judgements, and sometimes in-the-moment decisions as they emerged in the field, some researchers have voiced concerns that ethical issues have moved toward becoming a predefined, fixed set of principles that can be regulated and assessed by fellow professionals working in their particular field. Thus, the focus of research ethics has gradually but inexorably become sanitised as it has moved away from the individual knowledge and expertise of the researcher towards the authority of the institution.

Many researchers think this has led to a greater stability in research ethics, and have welcomed the fact that they can turn to a set of generalisable principles, aspirations and aims that can be used to unite their fellow researchers within a professional, academic, community. As educational and social research involves people, there is a potential for them to suffer anxiety, stress and even physical harm, and, as Robson (2011) points out, few people would seriously argue that these judgements and decisions should be left solely to the discretion of the researcher – and, yet, until around the 1980s, this was the norm. Few researchers are trained in law or have access to free legal advice and there is always the fear of litigation if a participant considers her/himself to have been harmed or perhaps libelled. So, following a code of practice provides at least some kind of safeguard both for the individual researcher and their institution.

However, there are others who regard the increasing bureaucratisation of research in the social sciences as having a more negative effect on the field. They see debates being ‘closed down’ and reduced to discussions around a series of, what are becoming, familiar themes (e.g., covert research, anonymity, past ethical indiscretions) or ‘a priori methodological certainties’ (Markham and Baym, 2009: 9), with researchers ticking off a list of key ethical principles or expectations that they are going to cover. Some seem to know what constitutes sound or good ethical behaviour and practice even before the fieldwork commences, and this has the danger of reducing debates about more contemporary and everyday issues.

There are other commentators, and this includes myself, who recognise the need for a balance between instruction and general guidance. While counselling about a system that is so loose that it becomes a free-for-all, May warns that too rigid a set of ethical rules might result in researchers concluding that the ‘only safe way to avoid violating principles

of professional ethics is to refrain from doing research altogether' (2001: 61), and so research activity will be stifled and reduced.

One question is about the researchers' **agency** (their capacity, or competence, to understand, to make choices and act). How far should researchers remain agents of their practice when it comes to research ethics, as they are in decisions about methodological and practical issues regarding research design, choice of questions, research context and so on?

How the world has changed: my own PhD

I generally welcome the growing recognition from institutions and individuals of the importance of ethical issues. In 1999, when I began the fieldwork for my own PhD research, which took place in three primary schools, the situation was much more lax than it is today. I gained access to the schools through professional contacts I had made as a teacher and the head teachers were regarded as acting in *loco parentis*. No letters were sent to parents about interviewing children and, although most were conducted in pairs, on occasions I was left alone with a child for up to an hour. Because I was a teacher, it seemed to afford me a degree of trust but no one mentioned anything about the need to have a document from the Criminal Record Bureau (CRB)¹ as it did not come into existence until 2002 . How the world has changed in 15 years!

In one of the schools, I also interviewed children during curriculum time and, although I felt this could be justified, not least because it developed their Speaking and Listening skills, I would not usually be permitted to do this today. Finding the time to conduct in depth interviews with children can now be difficult, as there is generally not enough time during breaks and lunchtimes to conduct the interview in one go. After school is also more

¹ In 2012, the CRB was replaced by the DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). These organisations search(ed) to see if a researcher has a criminal record.

problematic and so interviews may have to be conducted over more than one session, which can break the flow of the conversation and mean that time might be needed to build up trust and a conducive atmosphere.

5.2 Writing an ethical review²

As in every institution, all students (and professional researchers) at UCL/IOE require ethical approval before entering the field of research. There are some students whom I have come across who see getting ethical approval as a rather tiresome bureaucratic exercise to be overcome before they begin their study, and they can regard ethical approval as a ‘bolt-on’ to the writing, or as part of a list to be ticked off and ‘put away’ and forgotten about. However, ethical issues should be regarded as an integral and reflexive, where the researcher reflects on the research (including their interpretations), and is aware of the effect of their presence on the setting and process from beginning to end.

Dowling and Brown argue that writing an ‘ethical review’ – the term varies in different countries, e.g. in Australia it is called an ‘ethics approval application’ or ‘ethics clearance application’ – for a research project is a research activity in itself (2010:), and Brooks et al. argue that ‘poorly designed research is by definition unethical since it is likely to waste participants’ time’ (2014: 60). Ethical concerns should be at the forefront of any research project including the design, but they will also frequently surface throughout the fieldwork and analysis, data curation and storage, and should continue through to the dissemination stages, publication and beyond, such as data disposal. Indeed, ethical issues often begin to arise at the very start of any project when you are selecting a topic to research and will depend on the kind of researcher you want to be (e.g., whether you like meeting and

² This phrase may be called something different in other countries. For example, in Australia, it is called an ‘ethics approval application’ or ‘ethics clearance application’.

talking to people, or whether you prefer working in front of a computer) and the design you are going to use. For instance, your research will bound to involve more ethical issues if it involves you interviewing young children, or if you are researching your own community, or perhaps a particularly vulnerable group such as people with disabilities, than if you are carrying out secondary research. Whiteman (2012) argues that the ethical position that the researcher comes to adopt will come from their engagement with theories and be informed by the debates around the particular ethical issues likely to be found in their own field(s) of research through their interrogation of the literature, as well as the contingencies of the local empirical context.

Ethical concerns are particularly similar to the methodology in that they not only need to be regarded as being an integral part of the whole research process but just like your methodology, and other principles of selection (e.g., how you draw the sample), you will need to make, and then be able to defend, the various ethical decisions from an informed position in articles that you may write, at conferences, and of course, at your viva.

In many institutions, students who wish to collect data from human participants have to undertake a full ethics approval application. At UCL/IOE, students carrying out empirical research have to complete a relatively short ethical document, which has a number of helpful headings, and covers the key ethical principles (see Section 5.5). [See WEBLINK 2](#) to students' ethics forms for research applications. Depending on the area and methodology adopted, students may take two or three iterations before their supervisor is satisfied. The form is then cleared by your supervisor(s) and one member of their Advisory Panel³, Sometimes, research designs and methodologies change, and where these are judged by you and your supervisor(s) to be substantive (e.g., introducing interviews

³ Each doctoral student has an advisory panel of about 5-6 other members of academic staff. These people are can be drawn on for advice on subject like ethical clearance and may also be used for upgrades from MPhil to PhD, or, perhaps as internal examiners.

rather than, or in addition to, questionnaires), a further ethics application will be necessary. There is a lot of guidance available and a valuable source of information is the Research Ethics Guidebook (see [WEBLINK 3](#)).

Doctoral and masters students need to engage with the research ethics community (see Bridges, 2009) and get in the habit of discussing the ethical issues involved in their research with their peers, as well as with their supervisor. At UCL/IOE, forums are held twice a year, on an informal basis, where students have the opportunity to present and discuss ethical issues that have arisen during their research with other students and a senior member of staff. In this way, students not only learn more about the conventions and rules but they also learn the associated language used to discuss them.

5.3 Research Ethical Committees (RECs)

A key development in the increasing ethics surveillance was the publication of the Economic Social and Research Council's (ESRC) research ethics framework in 2006 (updated in 2012 and 2015) and the subsequent introduction of research ethics committees (RECs) throughout HE institutions.

UCL/IOE's own REC was created in 2005, and I have been a member since 2011. Others have existed in a number of British universities for some time, which have comparisons to the established use of Institutional Review Boards in the USA higher education system, which were introduced after the National Research Act 1974.

According to the ESRC guidelines:

A Research Ethics Committee (REC) is defined as a multidisciplinary, independent body charged with reviewing research involving human participants to ensure that their dignity, rights and welfare are protected. The independence of a REC is founded on its membership, on strict rules regarding conflict of

interests, and on regular monitoring of and accountability for its decisions.

(2015: 44)

The referral of a student's work to the REC is comparatively rare and there are only a small handful submitted to the REC from the PhD or EdD cohorts each year. However, as apart of quality control, the REC samples and considers ethics reviews of a number of students each year, in order to ensure that they are of a high standard (approximately 1 per cent at masters level and below and 5 per cent at doctoral level), and confirm that the approval decision was correct.

The remit of research committees is to ensure that researchers do not engage in unethical behaviour (Hammersley, 2006), but they are also there to protect the institution and, when there are any, the funders from legal action brought by a participant(s) who feel that they have been unfairly treated and have a grievance.

One of the most vocal critics of RECs is the ethnographer Martin Hammersley (*ibid.*). He argues that ethics is a highly complex, and often contested, area and that the literature shows that there are often major disagreements amongst social scientists about key ethical issues. He maintains that ethics is a field where there is often not only no agreed answer, there is not generally a single right answer. He points out that some decisions require weighing up a range of ethical and methodological considerations against each other and this often requires detailed knowledge of the research context, which is always situated (Simons and Usher, 2000; Brooks et al., 2014) or contextualised in each unique research setting. He also questions whether RECs have the expertise to tell researchers how they should conduct their research, and argues that research committees do not have the detailed knowledge of the research context to be able to make decisions, and that they rely heavily on medical and psychological models where informed consent is particularly crucial (see Schrag, 2011). He also makes the point that, unlike in medical research, the

risk and level of likely harm to participants is comparatively low. [See WEBLINK 4](#) for my own experiences of being on the ULC/IOE REC. Although I feel that Hammersley makes a convincing case about how all research context-specific I still believe that doctoral students benefit from at least some guidance based around a series of principles from a Code of Conduct.

5.4 Ethical guides/frameworks

Apart from the ESRC's research ethics framework there are also a number of other frameworks and guidelines that researchers are able to draw on, and you need to familiarise yourself with the code or codes most relevant to your particular theoretical and empirical field. The most common of these in the UK are the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011), the British Psychological Association (BPA, 2009) and the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002, updated 2004). See [WEBLINK 5](#) for URL addresses for these frameworks. Dowling and Brown refer to these various codes or frameworks as the theoretical ethical field (2010: 36), and each of them have their own particular merits and omissions. Robson (2011) points out that many websites from these organisations contains earlier versions so that is possible to see how ethical ideas have developed and changed over time.

Over the last decade or so, ethical principles and expectations from these frameworks have become normalised and, although useful as a guide, still need to be subjected to interrogation, contestation and debate. To view the six key ethical principles from the ESRC framework as an example, see [WEBLINK 6](#).

Brooks et al. (2014) point out that these frameworks are largely based on the three main principles enshrined in the Belmont Report (DHEW, 1979), which is widely recognised as creating the first set of formalised guidelines for research involving people. These are: (i)

respect for persons; (ii) doing good and avoiding harm (beneficence and maleficence); and (iii) Justice. Brooks et al. (2014) also trace the philosophical links back to the movements of utilitarianism (choosing an action on the basis that it maximises good and minimises harm) and deontology (where certain ideas are seen as intrinsically right or wrong and where some rules have a universal application). Research codes are particularly strong in the English-speaking countries such as the USA (American Educational Research Association's *Code of Ethics*, 2011), and Australia (*Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*, AG, NHMRC and ARC, 2007).

The frameworks recognise that many questions do not have simplistic answers and the impossibility of producing a straightforward list of rules and directives that can guarantee that the research will be ethically conducted. They attempt to provide a balance between the interests of the researcher, the interests of research participants, the academy and the institution where the researcher is based. One of the difficulties with these guidelines, or protocols, is that they need to cover a whole variety of situations and behaviours and are therefore often, by definition, nebulous and vague. Whiteman calls them 'broad placeholders for a range of ideas/values' (2012: 139), and for some types and areas of research some of these codes raise more questions that they seek to answer (Dowling and Brown, 2010). Moreover, many social researchers argue that ethical issues and dilemmas are often highly context-specific and it therefore need to be left up to individual researchers to interpret the meanings and how to fit them into their particular project. As Robson maintains, researchers need to adopt a 'situational relativist' approach (2011: 197), which means that researchers have to be flexible and able to respond to localised events (see Whiteman, 2012). This viewpoint will be developed further in later sections.

5.5 Key ethical principles

In this section, I want to draw out some underlying themes and signal the main points which, I hope, will generate a number of issues leading to further thought and discussion. Although I am aware that these key principles can come across as another tick list, similar to those I have been critiquing, I am arguing that the great majority of researchers working in the social sciences and education would agree that, although ethics can be intrinsic to, or immanent in, the research process, there are also a number of extrinsic, universal principles. Although there is no single set of catch-all rules, you still need to be aware of, and understand, the ethical issues, even if you are going to reject them.

I wish to argue that there are six key ethical areas that I always check to see if they have been covered in the research proposal that I am asked to review, whether it be for students or professional researchers (see Box 5.2).

[Start box]

Box 5.2 Six key ethical areas

1. Explanations about the research
2. Informed consent
3. Voluntary participation
4. Right to privacy
5. Avoidance of harm
6. Data stewardship and security

[End box]

I will now expand on each of these six key areas, although I will have much more to say about some than others, namely about the particularly contentious areas of consent and the right to privacy.

(i) Explanations about the research

Telling participants what the research is about is a fundamental principle, although of course you may not always know all the details yourself, and have only a vague idea of how the research might end up looking like, particularly if you are conducting ethnographic research. Nevertheless, the research will have aims and you will probably have a research question or questions, however vague they are at the beginning, and however much they might actually change as the fieldwork develops. You will have to make a judgement as to how much information you tell participants – most people, in my experience, only want brief details, and some are not interested at all. I have prepared information sheets to be distributed and many a time I have subsequently found out from participants that these have remained. Nevertheless, this is still good practice and they are can always be taken away and read later. It may also depend on the age and capacity of the participant to understand, and the time you are planning to spend with them. In my own PhD, I told the children (10–11-years-old) that I was interested to find out what it was like to be a boy or girl in their school and that I was planning to turn it into a book; I obviously gave the head teachers and the class teachers a little more details of my intentions. Similarly, if I am carrying out market research using a short, structured, questionnaire with people in the street, I am inclined to provide them with less information than if I am going to spend time interviewing someone.

Examples of information sheets that I have used can be viewed on [WEBLINK 7](#) but I try and keep information down to one side of A4. I usually have a brief paragraph about

what the research is about; the participants' role in the research (e.g., a 30-minute interview); what will happen to data collected, and my own contact details (an email address and telephone number). The information sheet will also emphasise that their participation is voluntary and that all names of people and places will be changed. Some researchers use the back of the information sheet for a consent form but I will write more about this in the section below.

Of course, telling participants about what is involved in the research project assumes that you are not carrying out covert research and that you are being as overt, or upfront, as possible. The theme of covert research is discussed later in this section.

Sometimes, issues arise during the research process that could not have been anticipated beforehand and you have to make a judgement about how much to tell your participants. A recent example of this came from one of my colleagues at UCL/IOE, who was running a project that involved screening children for stereoscopic vision, which is where people have difficulty in seeing objects in depth or in 3-D, although they can often compensate this by other means. She discovered that two of the children had this condition and was unsure whether or not to tell the parents, particularly as the condition is often hereditary. In the end, she did tell them but told me that she regretted it as it caused them unnecessary anxiety. This example shows the difficult balance that a researcher might have between withholding certain pieces of information against the rights of participants to know everything that is being discovered.

(ii) Informed consent

The concept of informed consent is linked to the ethical principle of ensuring respect for the autonomy of the participants, and also highlights worries concerning how power relations are articulated during research relationships (Brooks et al., 2014). However, although some research designs are more straightforward than others, issues around

informed consent are often slippery, complex and generally characterised by disagreement. We need to adopt a highly sceptical stance towards the whole concept of informed consent and whether it is possible for people to sign up to a research study with the full knowledge of what it is about.

The notion of informed consent is inherited from the field of biomedics, and many researchers working in education and the social sciences have questioned the whole concept of ‘informed consent’ (Wiles et al., 2004, 2007). They have examined the many tensions and dilemmas that are likely to arise, particularly for those of us engaging in qualitative methodologies (see, e.g., Thorne, 1980; Burgess, 1989; and Malone, 2003), and conclude that there will always be an element of the research that remains hidden, both from the researcher as well as from the participants. As Eisner argues, ‘the notion of informed consent implies that researchers are able to anticipate the events that will emerge in the field about which those to be observed are to be informed’ (1991: 215), while Malone writes that ‘truly informed consent is impossible in qualitative research studies seems to be a given’ (2003: 812).

Asking participants for their consent to take part in the research should not only happen at the beginning of the study and, particularly for longer periods of fieldwork where people may be interviewed more than once, consent should be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

Opting in and opting out (implied consent)

An important distinction needs to be made between two forms of consent – opting-in and opting-out. When opting-in, participants are asked to make an active choice of whether they, or perhaps their child, want to take part in the research. Box 5.3 gives what a typical opt-in question on a consent form might look something like

[Start box]

Box 5.3 A typical opt-in consent form

A researcher, Jon Swain, from University College London/Institute of Education, will be attending your child's class next Wednesday to observe their science lesson. The main focus of the research is to evaluate children's understanding of the concept of gravity. He will only be observing the lesson and will not be talking to any of the children in the class. If you are happy for him to visit the class on this day, please sign the form below and return it through your child to their teacher, Mrs Glass.

Jon Swain has had a full Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) certificate.

I give my permission for Jon Swain to observe my child's science lesson on xx November 2016.

Print full name:

Signed:

Date:

The opt-out form has implied consent and you tell participant what you intend to do and assume that they give their consent unless you hear something to the contrary. This kind of consent form would look something like the one shown in Box 5.4.

[Start box]

Box 5.4 A typical opt-out consent form

A researcher, Jon Swain, from the Institute of Education, will be attending your child's class next Wednesday to observe their science lesson. The main focus of the research is to evaluate children's understanding of the concept of gravity. He will only be observing the lesson and will not be talking to any of the children in the class. If you are **not** happy for him to observe your child in the class on this day, please sign the form below and return it through your child to their teacher, Mrs Glass.

Jon Swain has had a full Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) certificate.

I do not want my child to be observed in his/her science lesson by Jon Swain on xx November 2015.

Print full name:

Signed:

Date:

[End box]

Other examples of consent forms can be seen in [WEBLINK 8](#). Of course, there are a number of potential problems with both of these consent forms. The first is that, if the form of communication is a child's book bag⁴ you cannot be sure if the parent has received the form. Second, it is not clear what would happen if a parent decides to opt-her/his child out of your observation. Does the child have to go somewhere else? Do you make sure you don't include this particular child in your fieldnotes? Much may depend on the nature of the observation: will be it be passive, with you observing from the back of

⁴ A receptacle such as a satchel or rucksack that children use to carry things between home and school such as book or school notes etc.

the class, or will your visit also involve you actively going round the class and asking children what they are doing or thinking?

It is a lot more straightforward with interviews where my view is that parents should always have to opt-in, whatever the subject of the research is.

Written or verbal consent?

This question usually provides a subject of rich discussion during the CDR session: once again, there are no easy answers, and much of it is context dependent. Some people insist that researchers should always be required to have written consent from participants as a safeguard in case anything goes wrong and, say, the participant says they were forced to take part. I have never known or heard of this happening. However, it is interesting to speculate on the legal status of a consent form: are they legal documents and what would be their status in a court of law if it were ever tested? In my experience, many participants regard consent forms as a burden and while they seem happy to sign the form, many do not bother to read what it says. Once again, while I always obtain written consent from parents if I am interviewing their child, I am less likely to ask for this from adults. Recently, I arranged for some mentors working in Further Education (FE) colleges to attend a focus group at UCL/IOE. Some people think that I should have begun the interview by asking them to sign a consent form but my argument is that they were willing autonomous human beings and would not have turned up to meet me if they had felt coerced in anyway. In other words, their attendance was their consent. Sometimes, I have to interview people by telephone. They have previously been sent a questionnaire, and at the end there is a section asking them if they are willing to be interviewed by me by telephone. If they are, then they supply their telephone number (and sometimes their email address) and indicate the time of day that is most convenient for them. When I ring them

up a few weeks later, I make it plain that their participation is voluntary but I take it that their consent has been given by: (a) saying so on the questionnaire; and (b) picking up the phone and not hanging up. Besides, the practicalities of sending them a consent form by post, or even by email, seems to me to be an unnecessary burden, not least on the potential interviewees.

One question that you might want to consider is the participants' capacity of competency to consent to take part, which leads us into the next heading.

Research with children

Ethical decisions are particularly complicated, and often conflict, when the research involves children. For more information on children's capacity of competency to consent to take part in research, see [WEBLINK 9](#). Decisions that often emerge include how a researcher might weigh parent's rights to whether their child should take part in a study against the rights of the child, particularly when their own opinions may be at odds with the views of their parents? Of course, this also depends on the area of research: for example, a study into the strategies children use for long multiplication, against children's views on taking drugs or matters concerning their sexuality. If I was interviewing 16-year-olds about controversial matters, I might want to ask for the parents' permission but the young people might be more unlikely to give truthful responses if they knew that their parents were aware – they would certainly be very interested in what was going to happen to the data and it would be vital to stress confidentiality.

The age of the child is also important and there is obviously a big difference between a 4-year-old and a 16-year-old. Debates in the literature around whether or not you need to seek parental permission to interview adolescents, say between the ages of 16 and 18, are messy. Although, in some countries, the 18-year-old rule is fixed, this is not the case in the

UK – however, in practice, most RECs tend to use the biological age (rather than, say, evaluating the young person’s maturity) as the main determinate of whether parental consent needs to be obtained (Brooks et al., 2014). I interviewed young army recruits aged 16 and did not seek parental consent, but in a way the army acted as an organisation similar to *loco parentis*. Although the majority of the questions were about the basic skills provision they were undertaking (all had been chosen because they had relatively poor basic skills), some of the interview questions were about potentially sensitive issues such as early family life and perhaps getting into trouble during their early adolescent life. Even so, it would have seemed strange, even perverse, to seek their parent’s permission.

Sometimes, young people need protecting for their own good as on average they have less idea of the repercussions of what they say and do than an adult and this is recognised in law. Sometimes, in the social-media-obsessed world, a young person might make a comment that they later come to regret and the problem is that, although this may have been a transient view, it becomes fixed and permanent and one day somebody might try and search for it to check out a person’s history.

Some of the most important people when researching children are the gatekeepers, who control access to the research, whether they be parents, head teachers or other professionals in mainstream services. The general guidance is to ask the parents’ consent to approach children and then ask for the children’s consent. Interviews with children (almost) always require parents’ permission. Observations often don’t but it depends on the nature of the activity involved. As a rule, if a researcher wants to observe behaviour and practices in the playground, he/she needs the permission of the head teacher; if they want to observe a class, they need the permission of the head teacher and the class teacher; if they want to observe a group of children for any sustained length of time (of more than a

few minutes), they need the permission of the head teacher, the class teacher and the parents.

Covert research and deception

As we have seen, many ethical decisions are complex and not straightforward. Sometimes research can be, and needs to be, covert, which involves deceiving people. Most codes of ethical practice allow for covert research as long as it can be soundly defended and the end justifies the means, and Hammersley (2006) questions whether some degree of deception is unavoidable if we want to carry our research on powerful groups or politically sensitive topics. Thus, there is a utilitarian argument for justifying deception in that if there is an overall benefit and it tells us something useful it is for the greater good. One example may be if a researcher wants to evaluate public reaction to a stranger having a cardiac arrest in a public place and see who, if anyone, comes to assist. They stage the incident with an actor in, say, a park, and then observe. Does the researcher need consent from the watching public – but if they sought it this would ruin the experiment. It also raises other ethical issues, of course: what if a watching member of the public becomes distressed and is therefore caused harm? [See WEBLINK 10](#) for further information about two studies involving covert research from Humphreys (in the 1960s) and Fielding (in the 1970s).

For students, obtaining ethical permission from the REC is obviously going to be harder when some element deception is involved. In my experience, this is comparatively rare for doctoral research but I remember one doctoral student who wanted to investigate the extent to which schools used institutionally racist practices. She told the school that she was looking at assessment procedures and, although this was not the main focus of her research, she could hardly tell the school what her real purpose of the data collection was. Her application was passed by the REC: she used the justification that her research was a

means to an end, that her design required her to act in the way she did, and without some degree of deception or even subterfuge it would have been impossible to collect or generate the necessary data. In Section 5.6 on Internet research, we will come across another doctoral student, Natasha Whiteman, who also had to engage with issues of deception when she carried out observational online research on two Internet-based fan groups.

(iii) Voluntary participation

Participants must take part in the research on a voluntary basis and be told that they can freely withdraw at any time. One question that students sometimes ask is whether people can say they are withdrawing from the research after the research project is finished? Well it depends on what you mean finished? If the research findings have been published, or are in the form of a bound thesis, then the answer is 'no'; however, until this point has been reached they can say that they wish to withdraw their data from the research. Although I have never had this happen to me, a colleague of mine was frustrated when one of her interviewees told her that she wanted to withdraw from the research and requested that her data was not used. This was very frustrating for my friend as the interview had been a particularly good one and had produced rich data. The participant's concern was that she believed that she had mentioned certain colleagues in an unfavourable light and, although my colleague offered to show her the transcript and remove any contentious passages, the participant could not be persuaded and the data was lost.

Some people get worried if researchers offer any gifts or incentives as they can possibly contaminate the research by only attracting a particular type of person and by undermining the principle of free choice, on which informed consent is based (Farrugia, 2013). It depends on what the circumstances are, and what the nature and value of the gift. For

example, when I held the evening focus group for FE lecturers working as mentors (whom I mentioned above regarding obtaining their consent), I felt it was only courteous to provide them to provide refreshments in recognition of them giving up their time for me after a hard day's work. Moreover, the halls of residence around UCL/IOE are full of adverts for psychology students to be paid a few pounds to give up their time to take part in various experiments.

Coercion is a more difficult area. Whilst people should never be asked to take part in your research when you judge it to be against their will, other people might take part in, say, an interview as a personal favour. There have been times when I have felt a little uneasy when working in schools. I have asked the head teacher to nominate a class that I can use for my research and I have been conscious that, although the head teacher will normally choose a teacher who is competent, confident and accommodating, it may also be the case that the teacher concerned may not have any real choice, and will feel awkward if they refuse to accommodate me.

There can also a problem when people are being observed. For instance, during my PhD research, I observed some of the Year 6 (11-year-old) boys playing football in the playground and I was also interested in other playground interactions. This meant that I was also observing hundreds of other children, whose consent I did not have, either from them or their parents. Of course, it is a matter of degree and I could argue that no one was going to be named, nor likely to come to any harm. Nevertheless, it raises the issue about the rights that people have about being or not being observed as part of a research project. How can they withdraw from the research? During my fieldwork, I also wrote down a countless number of overheard conversations from both children and adults in my field diary, and it was simply not practicable to have asked individuals to give their permission every time. In many ways, it is about what is researchable and who can be researched?

Too many restrictions will make research impossible and I feel that there are always going to be decisions that ultimately are made in-the-moment, and come down to the researcher's own judgement *in situ*.

(iv) Right to privacy

Measures should be taken to ensure participants' privacy and these include the *attempt* to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity. I say 'attempt' because this is not always possible, particularly for researchers carrying out a study in or about their own institution, and where it is possible to Google the name of the student and identify where he/she works. This, then, is a particularly pertinent matter for EdD students, many of whom are, in effect, insider researchers, but it also applies to any doctoral student conducting research inside, or about, their own workplace.

The difference for me between confidentiality and anonymity is that if someone tells me something they regard as private, I will hold it in confidence and not tell anyone else, unless it is about something that breaks the law, while anonymity is the guarantee that I will change names of all people and places, and they will not be able to be identified. An interesting story about the consequences that can result when a researcher behaves without integrity and reveals the names of people and places can be seen on [WEBLINK 11](#).

Protecting participants' privacy is particularly apposite when it comes to children. Some of these issues have already been discussed under the section 'Informed Consent' and come within the area of child protection. The term currently used in the UK is 'safeguarding', which is broader than 'child protection': this takes priority over other considerations and relates to the action taken to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm.

Revelations

Glesne reminds us that: 'when others trust you, you invariably receive the privilege and burden of learning things that are problematic at best and dangerous at worst' (1999: 119). There are sometimes occasions when you are interviewing and a participant says something that requires you to make an in-the-moment decision. In my own research, I remember a boy telling me that he was being bullied. I then had to make the decision of whether to tell his teacher or not. Part of this involved me making a judgement about the nature and the extent of the bullying but I offered him the choice of whether he wanted me to tell his teacher or not. In the end, we left it that I would ask him about it at the next interview (the following term) and suggested that if the problem was still persisting I would then report it.

Connolly and Parkes (2011) from UCL/IOE, researched gang members in London and interviewed about eight people over a six-week period. They had to continually emphasise their distance from the police and that all information would remain completely confidential. An exception to this was if a disclosure was made, such as if they revealed the name of a person who had committed a criminal offence, or even if this was one of them. But doing this was not always easy and split decisions often have to be made in the moment, sometimes based on the perceived seriousness of the offence. For instance, would you report someone to the police if they admitted shoplifting – this may depend on the amount, type and cost of the goods stolen? Almost all of us would not hesitate reporting a person if they confessed to the interviewer that they injured someone and caused them harm, but what about if they said they were carrying a knife, as all their friends in the gang do for their own protection? Despite this being a criminal offence, it is a trickier situation, particularly when the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee has been built up over time and where mutual trust is paramount.

Insider research

Insider research has a series of ethical and methodological issues all to its own.

Conducting insider research within her own HE institution, Malone writes about how:

The participants are increasingly sharing things with me that are very personal and that they inevitably preface with 'You can't write this up.' In some instances, what they tell me only confirms things I have figured out from on-the-record stuff and that's no problem. But in other cases, I'm not sure how to handle it. For instance, a very difficult situation has developed between one of the students and a professor, a situation that has affected the student so deeply that, for a while, she was almost unable to function professionally ... She used me almost as a therapist, willingly telling me all sorts of things that she obviously does not want made public, but with the tape recorder running throughout. I know these things, but I can't write these things. I don't know what to do with what I know. (2003: 807–8)

This shows the particular problem of trying to guarantee anonymity for insider researchers. If I was a teacher researching in my own school and I mention someone by their title (e.g., the head of science, mathematics coordinator, deputy head teacher, etc.), it is relatively easy for someone to find out who I am talking about: all they have to do is look at the person who wrote the thesis, enter them into google and find the name of the school where they are working. Therefore, researchers should not promise to ensure anonymity when they can't. Malone writes that the promise to protect participants' identities was one of the most 'disingenuous aspects of the informed consent letter' (2003: 809):

I naively and ineffectually offered my participants pseudonyms and promised to make 'every effort' to protect their confidentiality ... What I did not anticipate was that it would also be impossible for me to protect their identities beyond the local community. (Ibid.)

If anonymity cannot be completely guaranteed the participants need to know what the risks are to their privacy and the consequences that might accrue if their name is revealed.

This will change the nature of the data that are being collected as participants are likely to be much more cautious in what they tell you, and so this also becomes a methodological issue. For instance, few are going to complain about a member of the senior management team if they think there is a chance that their feelings about them will be revealed. One way around this is for the researcher to allow **member checking** to take place: this involves showing the transcript to the participant, with the promise that they can remove any section which they may be controversial. While this may give the participant greater confidence to talk openly it will of course have an irrevocable effect on the data generated and this will need to be acknowledged. Malone (ibid.) originally felt that the chance for her participants to read her interpretations would be a protection against misrepresenting or misinterpreting their views but realised that this also had the potential to be traumatic for them.

Writing about research on the Internet, Whiteman (2012) recounts two contrasting views on whether a researcher is duty bound to reveal names or not in their write-up, which is based on an article by Herring (1996). The first source of evidence Herring quotes comes from those who regard online data as being 'published works and hence protected by copyright law' (ibid.: 154), which maintains that researchers should give full credit to attributed sources and consider revealing names of users and sites. The second position, based on an article by King (1996) in the same journal, advocates that all sources should remain hidden. Whiteman criticises both stances as being based on universal assumptions, which lack a understanding of local contexts that do not take account of a researchers' aims, their methodology, the field they are working in and so on.

Sometimes, a situation arises where a participant is insistent that they want their own views voiced that their real name is mentioned in the write up. This happened to Mattingly (2005) when conducting research in American hospitals. As her relationship with her

participants became closer, so did they become more insistent that their views on the difficulties of caring for ill children were not only voiced but that the voice also had a real name. This can be a difficult decision and my default line is that I generally refuse. However, I have never had a person say they would withdraw from the research if I did not consent and, in all honesty, this might depend on how much I needed them and how good their data was. Crucially, it would also depend on there being no references in the data to other persons (even with pseudonyms) who might be traceable if the interviewee's identity is known. The worst-case scenario might be that, as a result of one known name, other names, perhaps with sensitive or contentious information, are also revealed. So the best advice is to play safe.

However, there was a case with a researcher at UCL/IOE who was interviewing some teenage girls as part of a focus group. They were rightly keen to know what would happen to the data, and who would know about their views. When the researcher explained that they did not need to worry because their names would be changed and their identities anonymised, they became angry and said that they would only continue to take part if their views and associated names were advertised in the public domain such as a social media site like Facebook (see Zimmer, 2009). I am not sure what the outcome was but it shows that promising participants anonymity and confidentiality is not always straightforward.

Sometimes, of course, it is impossible to anonymise a person, for example if you are interviewing the Secretary of State for Education or the Chief Inspector of Schools (also known as the Head of OFSTED⁵). Sometimes, these kinds of (powerful but publically accountable) people insist that they see the transcript before it is published and have the right to remove particular passages. Some people also want to see the questions before the

⁵ OFSTED is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. It inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people, and services providing education and skills for learners of all ages. It is a non-ministerial department.

interview and this will have consequences about the data. Sometimes, you may choose to show the questions beforehand because you want the interviewee to give a more considered and reflective response; on other occasions, you want a more immediate, spontaneous reaction, and worry that if the questions are seen before the interview you will get more of a public performance, which is more akin to a public relations exercise.

(v) Avoidance of harm

The avoidance of harm refers to any potential physical or psychological harm, discomfort or stress. Much of this also concerns the level of risk, which is defined:

by reference to the potential physical or psychological harm, discomfort, stress or reputational risk to human participants (and participating groups, organisations and funders) that a research project might generate. (ESRC, 2015: 27)

Sometimes, I have had interviewees become tearful when talking about personal issues. In my case, these have been unexpected in that they have not been as a result of a particular question on a particularly sensitive topic. However, harm can also affect the researcher as well as participant and you might have to fill in a personal risk assessment if, say, your research is taking place in a potentially dangerous area such as a conflict zone, or even if you intend to interview your participants in their homes, which may also be in an area of high crime. Some topics are very difficult to research and, for example, many academics are reluctant to carry out research into violence because of the ethical and methodological minefield that surrounds it (e.g., see Connolly and Parkes's research about youth gangs mentioned above). Not only can access be fraught, but the risks of harm are high to both participants and the researchers. Parkes (2010) discusses incidents where, in her attempt to equalise power differentials between adults and adolescent and/or child, her act of not challenging views or behaviours made her complicit in the violence she was attempting to

discuss, and she found that once she had relinquished the adult position it was very difficult to invoke or reclaim

(vi) Data stewardship and security

Some students are a little casual about how they keep their data. It is usually the case that you will store your files on a password-protected computer but I have seen pen-drives (memory sticks) left in computers in the library and so extra care needs to be taken. Some students are a little overcautious with what they write and I have come across assignments that have promised that data will be stored in a password-encrypted computer and hard copies will be stored in a fireproof, locked filing cabinet, for which only two people have the key. Of course, it depends on the sensitivity of the data and there will be occasions when encryptions will be necessary. However, it is also important to recognise a sense of proportion. Although each institution is likely to have its own specific rules about data storage, it is likely in the UK that students will need to confirm that all personal data will be stored and processed in compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA, 1998).

Some students change the participants' names immediately on commencing fieldwork and this may sometimes depend on how many people are in the sample. There is, though, a worry that, if you have a large number of participants, you are forever getting confused and when you are writing about Clare, are you referring to Rosanne or do you actually mean Davina? To some extent, when the time arises for you to change names will depend on the type of data that you are collecting and the number of people involved. Yes, it may be good practice to change names as soon as the data is collected and keep a list of pseudonyms but I have known many researchers who only change names at the stage when the data is in the public domain, such as when presenting work at conferences or in a written article.

Another question frequently asked is how long data should be kept before it is destroyed? This will again depend on the nature of the data but the general rule that I see on most UCL/IOE ethics forms is that data should not be kept beyond five years.

5.6 Internet research

As we have seen in Section 5.5 on the right to privacy, researchers have found themselves having to respond to new issues arising from technologically mediated environments, and Whiteman (2012) argues that Internet and new media technologies have been disconcerting for those using more traditional or conventional understandings of what it actually means to be ethical for both researchers and Internet users. Whiteman (2010) points out that this may be a particular concern for Internet researchers, who will often have the added difficulty of having to present and defend arguments, which persuade peers (and perhaps examiners) who have limited or no experience of this type of research in these particular settings (Clark and Sharf, 2007). For further detail of Whiteman's own research, which she conducted at UCL/IOE between 2004 and 2006, see [WEBLINK 12](#).

Researchers using social media platforms to carry out research need to be aware that some of them have a dubious ethical record, which they need to be wary of. For example, in 2012, Facebook manipulated nearly 700,000 users' news feeds to see whether it would affect their emotions. There was no informed consent to allow them to decide whether to take part in the study, and the changes to the news feeds were made without the users' knowledge.

There is a mounting literature on ethics in online research which offers guidance and discusses a number of issues, and although the established guidelines do not really deal with the complexities involved in researching online communities, a good starting point is

the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) 2012 report and the BPS *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research* of 2013.

The AoIR advocate the use of guidelines rather than a code of practice, which is in recognition of the need of the researchers to be adaptable and responsive to diverse contexts and to the continually changing technologies. This is a move away from the top-down regulatory models, and they emphasise the process approach to ethics, which highlights the researchers' own agency and responsibility for making judgements and decisions within highly specific contexts. For the AoIR, the process approach is dialogic, inductive, situated and case-based.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at and discussed writing an ethical review; the role of RECs and ethical guidance/frameworks; a number of key ethical principles and research using new technologies such as the Internet.

Some people may continue to think that research ethics can somehow be fixed at the beginning of the research, and because it complies with general principles or follows established procedures, it can remain fixed or unchanged throughout the project. Although some research designs are, indeed, more stable than others (think of experimental design against ethnography), many researchers (e.g., Robson, 2011; Hammersley and Traianou, 2012; Brooks et al., 2014) are right to point out that the research often has a situated and contingent nature, particularly when it is qualitative, and initial thoughts and designs are likely to be disrupted, undone or challenged by events arising during fieldwork. This fits in with the view that ethics are intrinsic to, or immanent in, the research process, and at least to some extent, conditional upon and responsive to the particularities of the varied contexts in which educational research is conducted. Research ethics should therefore be

seen as a 'continuous process of inquiry, interaction and critique throughout the entire research study' (McKee and Porter, 2009: 148).

Although I am arguing that certain ethical principles are also extrinsic and that, as researchers, we need to consider general principles and statements about what constitutes good ethical research practice:

We know that one size does not fit all, yet we continue to attempt to squeeze our research questions and ethical dilemmas into the framework that does not serve well the researched, the researcher, or the research community. (Malone, 2003: 812)

Whiteman (2012) argues that there needs to be a conceptual shift away from the idea that researchers should be held to account by a set of universal ethical principles towards a move where researchers are more involved in decisions that arise during the research based on the activities they become involved in. In her book *Undoing Ethics*, Whiteman (ibid.) argues for the consideration of two conceptual moves in research ethics, the embedded and/or situated nature and the dynamic process that it often involved. Thus, rather than applying a set of general, predefined and agreed principles, or a set of universal or totalising ethical norms, to research Whiteman (ibid.) argues for an *embedded approach* where the decision making of the researcher is situated within the local context and is informed by issues which cannot always be anticipated in advance or indeed even be possible to guarantee. For example, 'informed consent must always be obtained' and 'participants must always be anonymised' are not always possible, applicable or even desirable. Second, she also stresses the *dynamic nature* of the research process, which may be ongoing, contingent and fluctuating; in other words, ethical decision-making is usually in motion throughout the research process.

The emergence of RECs in HEs in the first decade of the century has, for some researchers, had a negative effect on the field as debates are ‘closed down’ and reduced to discussions around a series of, what are becoming, familiar themes. Researchers tick off a list of key ethical principles that they (think) they are going to cover, and this has the danger of reducing debates about more contemporary and everyday issues.

However, I wish to argue that there is a place for a set of guiding principles based on an agreed Code of Conduct, and although they might and cannot always be adhered to, it is surely better to be able to have them for reference and discussion. RECs are a step in the right direction and this includes their function of protecting the researcher, the institution and most importantly, the researched. While doing social science research is about more than applying rules, we must not forget that good research demands that ethical concerns should occupy a central place in the whole research process (Ruane, 2005).

[Start box]

Box 5.5 A summary of the key points

- Ethical issues are often complex and rarely straightforward, and it important for students (and researchers in general) to talk about them as part of research community.
- There has been a move away from the authority of the researcher, and a number of key principles have evolved which are enshrined in a number of guidelines and researchers are expected to adhere to them.
- Research is always situated or contextualised to each unique research setting, and this often requires detailed knowledge of the research context.
- The key ethical components involve explanations about what the research is about; informed consent; voluntary participation; rights to privacy; avoidance of harm; and data protection (including stewardship and security).

- There is a lot of guidance available (e.g., from a number of ethical guidelines/frameworks and Research Ethical Committees).
- Writing an ethical review is a research activity in itself and is an ongoing, continuous process.
- Ethical issues are dynamic and are embedded within a particular localised context, and this means researchers often need to be reflective and reflexive.
- Some issues arising from new technologies have disconcerting conventional understandings of more traditional ethical issues.

[End box]

Areas for discussion

Here are six scenarios for discussion. What would you do?

Scenario 1

You are conducting research with children who are having difficulties at school. During the course of the research you begin to suspect that one of the children has a serious health condition. You do not know if the family are aware of this. You do some exploration into the condition and it requires medical treatment. In your ethics application, you did not consider this possibility or make any plans relating to disclosure of information gained during the research. You did not state that any research results would be disclosed to the participants' parents. You are concerned about the health and welfare of the child but also do not want to cause undue stress if you are wrong.

Scenario 2

You are conducting observations for your research. During the course of your fieldwork, you are beginning to develop your interest in a different area to the one for which you

have ethical approval. Your findings are new and exciting and your observations are giving you plenty of rich data to develop your research in this new area.

Scenario 3

You are conducting a series of interviews with parents for your research. The interviews are in-depth but the topics are not sensitive. During the second meeting with one of your participants, they started to open up to you about their personal situation and show signs of distress during the interview. You think that they are trying to tell you that they are currently in an abusive relationship.

Scenario 4

You are doing your research in school. Your ethics application was commended for being very thorough, detailing clear informed consent procedures with the children. The head teacher at the school to which you have gained access to is very interested in your research and thinks that the findings will be beneficial to the school. It is a very busy time at the school, OFSTED have just been and the inspection did not go well, so morale is low. The head teacher is keen for you to go ahead with the research with as little fuss as possible and without informing the parents and gaining their consent. He does not think that you need to gain the consent of the children either. He says that they are used to having adults in their classroom and it won't affect them. You are concerned about jeopardising the relationship with the head teacher as it has been difficult to negotiate access to schools.

Scenario 5

You are conducting insider research/practitioner research in your place of work. You have informed your colleagues and they have given their consent for you to use data you gain in forthcoming meetings for your research. You are really pleased that your colleagues are

supporting you in this. As colleagues have given their consent, you have decided that you will do a comparison of this current data again – data that you already have from meetings that were held last year. This will help you to highlight the impact of policy changes.

Scenario 6

A researcher put children in two groups. Group A was meant to be composed of children on the autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), while Group B was supposed to consist of typically developing children. However, when the children in Group B were screened, she found that two showed signs of being autistic. Should she tell the parents? She decided not to because, first, the research tests lacked clinical accuracy, and so might be inaccurate and, second, it would not be right to raise concerns to parents who had not asked for this information.

Annotated bibliography

These are some readings that I have particularly enjoyed:

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2004) *Ethics, Social Research and Consulting with Children and Young People*. Barkingside: Barnardo's.

This text has useful suggestions if you are carrying out research with children and young people.

Boddy, J., Jennings, S., Morrow, V., Alderson, P., Neumann, T., Rees, R. and Gibson, W. (2010) *The Research Ethics Guidebook: A Resource for Social Scientists*. Available at: www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk (accessed 7 July 2016).

The website of this source is also very useful for assisting you to think through the ethical issues arising from your project.

Malone, S. (2003) “‘Ethics at Home’: Informed consent in your own back yard”, *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16 (6): 797–815.

This article is particularly useful for researchers using insider researcher about their own institution, and the difficulties of guaranteeing their anonymity and protecting their confidentiality.

Robson, C. (2011) *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner Researchers*, 3rd edn. Oxford: Blackwell.

This is clearly written and very accessible, and uses lots of real life examples. It has a very good chapter on ‘Ethical and Political Decisions’.

Whiteman, N. (2012) *Undoing Ethics: Rethinking Practice in Online Research*. London: Springer.

This is a very thought-provoking book from a former colleague of mine. Based on her own online research on two Internet-based fan groups, she discusses the relationship between the empirical, theoretical and methodological aspects of Internet research ethics.

Further reading

Hammersley, M. and Traianou, A. (2012) *Ethics and Educational Research*. Available at: www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethics-and-educational-research (accessed 7 July 2016).

A very accessible article that can be found online: it covers the key ethical principles and interrogates a number of interesting issues, such as how far can informed consent ever actually be informed or free?

Whiteman, N. (2012) *Undoing Ethics: Rethinking Practice in Online Research*. London: Springer.

Drawing from ongoing sociological research into the practices of media cultures online, this book explores contemporary debates regarding the moral, legal and regulative aspects of research ethics. The author proposes that the decisions we make should be informed by the nature of the environments we study and the habits/expectations of participants within them.