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Sociology at Surrey

University of Surrey

social research UPDATE

ISSUE 39

- There is a wide literature on the role of ethics in social science research, yet most of the discussion focuses on the actions of the researcher with respect to the participants.
- Ethical considerations from the point of view of non-participants in the research are, therefore, largely ignored. This is inequitable.
- Where research has practical implications, a more equitable perspective means that major issues of quality become more important than minor issues of ethics.
- This conclusion, if accepted, has favourable implications for the use of more rigorous designs, such as experimental approaches, which often appear to produce difficult ethical issues when solely considered from the point of view of participants.

Ethics and equity:

pursuing the perspective of non-participants

Stephen Gorard

This issue of *Update* considers ethics in social science research from the point of view of those people (the majority) who are *not* involved in it. Since this is not the usual way of approaching a consideration of research ethics, it leads to some controversial conclusions – such as that an over-riding ethical concern should be to the quality, and therefore the 'definitiveness', of the research undertaken. After a brief introduction, the paper uses an example from health services research to illustrate the difficulty of making clear cut decisions about ethical issues. This leads on to a discussion of the relationship between quality and ethics, and finally to a consideration of the implications of the argument so far for the use of, and resistance to, large-scale experiments in social science research.

While perhaps overplayed in importance by some writers, there will be at least some ethical considerations in any piece of research (see for example Walford 2001). Is deception of the participants in research acceptable? Should we always tell the truth? Should we encourage others to behave in ways they may not otherwise? What is the risk to the participants? Can we assure confidentiality? Moral judgements such as these require deliberation of several factors, and there is seldom a clear-cut context-free principle to apply. Even the widely accepted notion that it is always more ethical not to identify our research participants can be contested (see Grinyer 2002). However, we can rule out from further consideration all actions, such as violence or abuse, that we would all agree are indefensible in *any* research situation. There is also at least partial agreement among social science researchers over what is defensible and what is not. Professional societies, such as the BSA, BPS and BERA, publish agreed lists of what are essentially very similar 'rules' about honesty, sensitivity, and responsibility in conducting research. Most institutions also have an ethics board to whom researchers can apply for informed consent. I am, therefore, not suggesting in what follows that 'anything goes'. I am drawing attention to a lack of equity in the traditional consideration of ethics in research. For example, in the ten chapters in Welland and Pugsley (2002) there are interesting and varied discussions of a range of ethical issues from ten different authors. However, all could be summarised as being concerned with negotiating access, and the impact of the research process on either researcher or researched (see also for example, Klatch 1988, May 1997, or Bryman 2001, Chapter 24). There is no mention in standard texts of those people not taking part in the research, either as researchers or researched. Yet these excluded people are the majority. They, indirectly, fund much social science research and the findings of the research they fund often affect their lives. How would the ethics of research look to them?

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NHS Direct

Consider this example. NHS Direct is a telephone helpline set up to relieve pressure on other UK National Health Service activities. Callers can ask for help and advice, or reduce their anxiety about minor injuries or repetitive illness, without going to their General Practitioner or to a hospital out-patients service. Research reported by Carter (2000) found serious shortcomings in this new service. The evidence was collected by making a large number of fake calls to test the consistency, quality and speed of the advice given. In ethical terms, is this OK?

One argument against this study is that it has misused a procedure intended to relieve pressure on an already pressurised and potentially life-saving public service. By conducting the research using bogus calls, it is at least possible that individuals have suffered harm as a consequence. One argument for the study would be that realistic (and therefore 'blind') evaluations are an essential part of improving public services, and that the longer-term objective of the study was to produce an amelioration of any shortcomings discovered. If, for the sake of argument, NHS Direct was actually a waste of public funds, it would be important to find this out at an early stage and redirect its funding to other approaches. These other approaches could save lives and it would be unethical not to have done the research. This, in a nutshell, is the major issue facing ethics and research. Researchers will not want to cause damage knowingly, but is it worth them risking possible harm to some individuals for a greater overall gain? As with most decisions I am faced with, I do not have a definite answer to this one. Or rather, my definite answer is 'it depends'.

It depends, of course, on the quality of the research being conducted. Most observers would agree with this on reflection, but it is seldom made explicit in any discussion of ethics. It would, for example, be entirely reasonable to come to opposite conclusions about the example above depending on the quality of the study. If calling the helpline for research purposes runs a risk of replacing other genuine callers then it has to be considered whether the value of the research is worth that risk. If, for example, the study found that the line was working well, then no more research is needed (and the study has served its evaluative purpose). If the study found problems, and as a result these could be ameliorated (although it is clearly not the full responsibility of the researcher if they are not), then the study could claim to be worthwhile. The one outcome that would be of no use to anyone is where the research is of insufficient quality to reach a safe and believable conclusion either way. In this case, all of the risk has been run for no reason and no gain. From this it would not be too much of a stretch to say that, in general, poor research leading to indefinite answers tends to be unethical in nature, while good trustworthy research tends to be more ethical. Poor research wastes the time, at the least, of the participants, but is perhaps particularly unethical from the point of view of those outside the research situation.

The importance of quality

In many fields in which we wish to research our influence over ethical situations is marginal. For example, one may have to 'befriend' convicted serial killers, however repugnant the task, in order to find out about their motivations (if this is felt to be important to know). But one can still conduct both good and bad research involving these killers. Our control over the quality of our work is, therefore, generally greater than our control over ethical factors. Thus, ethically, the first responsibility of all research should be to quality and rigour. If it is decided that the best answer to a specific research question is likely to be obtained via an experimental design, for example, then this is at least part of the justification in ethical terms for its use. In this case, an experiment may be the *most* ethical approach even where it runs a slightly greater risk of 'endangering' participants than another less appropriate design. Pointless research, on the other hand, remains pointless however 'ethically' it appears to be conducted. Good intentions do not guarantee good outcomes. Such a conclusion may be unpalatable to some readers, but where the research is potentially worthwhile, and the 'danger' (such as the danger of wasting people's time) is small relative to the worth, this conclusion is logically entailed in the considerations above.

Reinforcement for this conclusion comes from a consideration of the nature of funding for research. Whether financed by charitable donations or public taxation, research must attempt to justify the use of such public funds by producing high quality results. If the best method to use to generate scientifically safe conclusions to a specific question is an experiment (for example), then there should be considerable ethical pressure on the researcher to use an experiment.

The ethics of experiments

The application of experimental designs from clinical research to social science practice does, however, highlight specific ethical issues (Hakuta 2000). In a simple experiment with two groups, the most common complaint is that the design is discriminatory. If the control group is being denied a treatment in order for researchers to gain greater knowledge about it, this could be deemed unethical. Fitz-Gibbon (1996) counters that this approach is only unethical if we know which group is to be disadvantaged. In most designs, of course, the whole purpose is to decide which treatment is better (or worse). We need evidence of what works before the denial of what works to one group can be deemed discriminatory. Perhaps a study would only be unethical if we could not find anyone who believed that the experimental group is not advantaged. In our current state of relative ignorance about public policy and human behaviour, it is as likely that the treatment will be the inferior approach for some, as that doing nothing to find out what works will damage the chances of others. An analogy for our present state of affairs might be the development of powered flight. All aeroplanes and flying machines designed around 1900 were based on the same Newtonian aerodynamical theory. In testing, some of them flew and some crashed, despite the belief of *all* designers that their own machine would work. It was only the testing that sorted one group from the other. To strain the analogy a little, one could hardly argue that it would be more ethical for us all to fly in planes that had not been tested. For some reason, most discussions of ethical considerations in research focus on possible harm to the research participants, to the exclusion of the possible harm done to future users of the evidence which research generates. They almost never consider the wasted resources, and worse, used in implementing treatments and policies that do not work (but see Torgerson and Torgerson 2001). In the UK it is legally impossible to market a new powder for athlete's foot without testing it, but we spend billions of pounds on public policies for crime, housing, transport and education that affect millions of people without any real idea of whether they will work. How ethical is that?

On the other hand, is it fair to society (rather than just the control group) to use an intervention without knowing what its impact will be? Would it be reasonable, for example, to try not jailing people sentenced for violent crimes simply to see if this led to less re-offending (de Leon et al. 1995)? Again the answer would have to be — it depends. What we have to take into account is not simply what is efficient or expedient but what is right or wrong. This judgement depends on values, and values are liable to change over time. In fact, doing the work of research can itself transform our views of what is right and wrong (Pring 2000). If an alternative punishment to prison led to less violent crime, who would object (afterwards)? Would we have oxygen treatments for neonates, or drugs for heart diseases, if we were dominated by short-term ethical considerations? Ideally, we should test all public and social interventions before using them more widely. The problems for social research, as outlined above, are also shared with disciplines like history (archaeology, palaeontology, astronomy etc.), but the difference here is that history (like the others) is constrained to be non-experimental and is, in effect, making the best of what is possible. Social science research has no such general constraint

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about experiments (although it obviously applies to some research questions).

Conclusion

Viewing ethics from the point of view of those in whose name research is done and by whom research is funded is unusual for social scientists, and therefore uncomfortable. We probably all abhor the use of the phrase 'the end justifies the means' because it is, of course, not true. Nevertheless, if we accept that research is to be done and that research, by its very nature, makes demands of all participants, then it seems clear that the research must be done well. Poor research, on the other hand, means that participants are disturbed for no good reason, funders are wasting their (often our) money, and researchers are wasting their time. These issues are discussed further in Gorard (2003).

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social research UPDATE
(ISSN: 1360-7898)
is published by
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