

Sociology Shortcuts

M12. Research Ethics

Ethics refers to the **duty of care** a researcher owes to people participating in their research and *ethical questions* involve beliefs about what a researcher *should* or *should not* do before, during and after their research.

The **British Sociological Association** (2004) notes the behaviour of researchers is bound by a code of *ethical practice* that is an integral part of the *professional research role* and **Pimple** (2002) suggests there are three main ethical questions researchers must ask to satisfy their professional integrity.

1. Is It True? This refers to both the research process (how it is generally conducted) and the relationship between research findings and their implications. At its most extreme, *unethical behaviour* here involves things like deliberately *fabricating* data or deliberately falsifying results.

2. Is It Fair? Unethical behaviour here refers to the different social relationships created during the course of the research, such as the relationship between the researcher and other researchers. This covers things like the *ownership* of a completed piece of research (who, for example, can ethically claim to be the author?). Authorship can be significant when career advancement depends on the ability to publish original research. A further aspect of fairness includes something like *plagiarism* - passing-off the work of others as your own.

A further aspect here is the relationship between researcher and respondents.

In **covert forms** of research, for example, is it ethical for the researcher to deceive respondents by pretending they are simply “on of the group” rather than a researcher studying the behaviour of that group?

Wallis (1977) wanted to study The Church of Scientology but the Church leaders refused to co-operate with his request for access to existing members, so he contacted ex-members instead and based his research around their opinions and experiences.

Rosenhan (1973) wanted to test if doctors could accurately diagnose schizophrenia and sent students displaying *fake* symptoms into hospitals to test his hypothesis that they could not - and the experiment discovered doctors were unable to expose the “pseudo (pretend) patients”.

Millgram's (1974) study of the effects of authority on people's behaviour - in this instance whether respondents were willing to inflict (or so they thought) extreme levels of pain on innocent strangers on the say-so of an authority figure - raises important ethical questions. Respondents were convinced they were administering electric shocks to “learners” whenever the latter gave an incorrect answer to a question (in fact no shocks were administered and the “victims” were under instructions to pretend they were being hurt). Ethical dilemmas here include:

- Tricking people
- Causing distress to respondents. (some argued and protested about the instructions they were being given and some broke down in the face of the pain they believed they were inflicting).
- Experimenting on people who do not know they are being studied.

3. Is It Wise? This refers to ethical questions over the relationship between “*the research agenda and the broader social and physical world, present and future*”. In other words:

- a. Can the research itself be morally justified?
- b. Would some other type of research have greater moral justification?

As **Pimple** puts it: “*Will the research improve the human condition, or damage it? Will it lead to a better world, or a worse one? Or less grandly, which of the many possible lines of research would we be better off pursuing? We have finite time and money for pursuing research, and the wisdom of research programs is a valid question in research ethics*”.

These questions are important in the context of ethical research and can be illustrated by a range of specific ethical observations:

1. **Explanation:** Ethical research involves the researcher being *open* with those they are researching in terms of things like explaining the purpose of the research and the nature of any relationships formed during the course of the research.

Some types of research involve methods (such as **covert participant observation**) that create high levels of involvement with respondents. Where close personal relationships exist, care must be taken to ensure that once the research is completed and contact diminishes, distress is not caused to potentially vulnerable people. For example, if your research involves visiting the elderly on a regular basis, it would be *unethical* to simply stop your visits once the research is completed.

2. **Truth** involves not deceiving participants about the research. This might include not telling participants the real reason for research, or the researcher pretending to be someone they are not.

3. **Harm:** Care must be taken to ensure the *physical* and *psychological* safety of both researcher and respondents. The interests, rights and general well-being of respondents must also be safeguarded. This might include respecting respondent privacy or minimising anxiety / distress caused by the research.

A further aspect of potential harm relates to **illegal behaviour** during the research. In Britain the collection, storage and retrieval of data are governed by such things as the **Data Protection Act**, the **Human Rights Act**, **Copyright laws** and the laws of **libel**. In addition, if research involves criminal or deviant activities, the researcher must consider the ethical question of their participation or their responsibilities to both the perpetrators and possible victims.

4. **Informed consent:** The researcher should always try to gain the consent of those being researched and it is unethical to bully or emotionally or physically blackmail people into participating. In addition, particularly when researching people who are relatively *powerless*, relationships need to be based on **trust** and **personal integrity** on the part of the researcher: for example, if the researcher promises *anonymity* as a way of researching people involved in criminal activities, disclosing those identities to anyone would be unethical.

5. **Confidentiality:** Research data can be used in many ways (not always how the researcher intends - media reports may seriously distort the research, for example) and respondents should be aware of any possible consequences of their participation. In addition, if respondents feel they have been mistreated (physically or verbally, for example) or misled, this may have **legal consequences** for the researcher and create problems for any subsequent research.

6. **Stop:** Respondents must have the right to withdraw their participation at any time and should not be coerced, physically or psychologically, to continue.

