

# **Ethics in Social Research: the views of research participants**

**SRA - 29th January, 2008**

**CONSENT AND CONFIDENTIALITY IN  
SOCIAL RESEARCH**

## Coverage of presentation

- Aims and design
- Conceptions of ethics
- Decision-making, information needs
- The interview interaction
- Confidentiality
- Discussion

## Ethical Relations

- To explore research participants' ethical requirements in interview-based studies
- Literature review
- Following up 50 participants in NatCen studies
  - People, Families and Communities Survey
  - Learning for Life and Leisure Survey
  - Improving Child Maintenance Payments Survey
  - Improving Child Maintenance Payments: qualitative study
  - Transport and Travel in Later Life: qualitative study
- In-depth interviews, purposive sampling, recorded, analysed using Framework

## ‘Constructing’ a perspective on ethics

- Explored ethics directly and via interview experience
- Varying familiarity and clarity
- Key components initially:
  - respect
  - morality, integrity, probity
  - acting beyond self-interest
  - following procedures
- Conception widened through discussion
- Understanding of ‘ethics’ constructed

## Decision-making

- Uneven patterns of absorption and recall
- Value of multiple information ‘events’ and ‘voices’
- Swift and non-contingent decision-making
- Decision based on:
  - research study
  - research process
- Trust and assumptions

## Decision-making pathways

- Motivation
  - Study subject
  - Process
- Absence of disinclination
- Reassurance or persuasion needed
- Sense of compulsion or obligation

## Information needs

- Subject matter and coverage
- Purpose of the research & how will be used
- Questioning style
- Voluntary nature of study and information giving
- Confidentiality & access
- How & why selected for participation
- Who funding and conducting research
- What happens to data

## The interview interaction

- Interviewer behaviour
  - comfortable and not intimidating
  - valuing and respecting
  - more relevant than personal information exchange, characteristic matching, participatory approaches



## Confidentiality

- Wide & varied understanding
- Unspecified requirements - general reassurance
- Information kept private
- Name & address not passed on
- Lack of clarity around analysis & reporting

## Key issues from participant perspective

| Before   | During   | After   |
|--|--|---|
| Unpressurised decision-making                      | Able to exercise right not to answer or say more than want to        | Right to privacy and anonymity respected in storage, access and reporting |
| Research independent and legitimate                | Unpressurised pace, time to think                                    | Unbiased and accurate research and reporting                              |
| Knowing why selected to be approached              | Feeling comfortable, valued and respected, not intimidated or judged | Opportunity for feedback – findings and use                               |
| Objective and intended use clear and worthwhile    | Opportunity for self-expression                                      | Use made of social research for wider benefit                             |
| Knowing what to expect                             | Questions relevant, not repetitive, clear                            |   |
| Openness and honesty, correcting misunderstandings | Not left feeling negative about participation                        |   |

## Discussion points

- Status of participant perspectives
- Consent as on-going process or one-off event?
- Giving information - when & how?
- Unfamiliarity of the situation;
  - Participant and researcher roles
  - trust vs rights
  - evaluating information provided on key issues like confidentiality



# NatCen

National Centre *for* Social Research

Literature review published as ESRC Research Methods Programme  
Working Paper number 30

<http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/publications/>

Full report published on GSRU website

[http://www.gsr.gov.uk/professional\\_guidance/ethics.asp](http://www.gsr.gov.uk/professional_guidance/ethics.asp)

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