Social Research Association

Ethical guidelines

December 2003

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Foreword

The origins of the SRA's concern to maintain an up-to-date set of ethical guidelines and be proactive in the discussion of social research ethics lies in our sense of responsibility for standard-setting in the profession of social research.

At present in the UK we have no reliable system of ethical governance or review. The sanctions we can apply to those who discredit our profession are limited. There is no comprehensive system of registration or licensing which can confirm the credentials or quality of a researcher for commissioners or the general public.

But it is even more complicated than that – the profession of social research is inter-sectoral (governmental, academic, commercial, voluntary and non-profit) and interdisciplinary (sociology, psychology, economics, politics, marketing, social work etc.); it is international and multi-problem based.

In addition, methodological innovation is a sine qua non for the study of a changing society and its ever-changing constituent individuals and institutions. New methods pose new ethical problems.

Recent legislative changes and concerns about litigation have increased funders' interest in and concern about good ethical practice in social research. Various initiatives are afoot and 2004 will see much more debate about the right ways to ensure compliance with good ethical practice across all sectors of social research.

In such a climate the key responsibility for ethical awareness and for the status of the profession rests with each individual social researcher and funder, as the actions of each affect us all. The Social Research Association has revised its ethical guidelines, first drawn up in the 1980s in the light of current concerns and knowledge. All SRA

members are required to read and abide by these guidelines as a condition of membership. We now present them more broadly so that they may be available to inform ethical practice and debate across the whole social research constituency.

Ceridwen Roberts
Chair SRA
2003

Background

In recent years ethical considerations across the research community have come to the forefront. This is partly a consequence of legislative change in human rights and data protection, but also a result of increased public concern about the limits of inquiry. There has also been enhanced concern for responsible action within the workplace with many large organisations expressing a desire for higher ethical standards in customer relations and in investment decisions. Growing corporate responsibility entails a clear recognition that business and public service activities are not value-free and cannot set standards merely by the meeting of measurable performance indicators. Responsibility entails thinking about the consequences of one's actions upon others and the establishment of clear lines of accountability for the redress of grievances.

No field of human activity can be considered exempt from such concerns and the police service, health and medicine and social care as well as financial and commercial enterprises have been led increasingly to estimate the ethical consequences of their activities. This increased concern for accountability in these spheres has led to the establishment of systems for "research governance"; that is, ways of discovering and sharing information that are open to public scrutiny and can be seen to be subject to the highest ethical standards. In an era of advanced information and communications technology ethical concerns over access to and the management of information are heightened. This current reconsideration of research ethics by the SRA matches a contemporary mood in both the public and private sector to enhance responsible behaviour.

SRA Policy on Research Ethics

This updated version of ethical guidelines draws heavily upon the structure and content of the original guidelines which were produced by an SRA Ethics Committee in the 1980s that, in turn, drew upon the code of the International Statistical Ethics Committee. The original guidelines were reviewed, revised and extended where necessary in 2001 by an SRA working group of Anne Corden, Alan Hedges, Roger Jowell, Jean Martin, Malcolm Rigg and chaired by Ron Iphofen. This 2003 update has been produced after consultation with the members of that working group and the current SRA Executive committee and in light of comment from others with appropriate professional interest and expertise.

The vocabulary, content and style of the guidelines have been considered from the perspectives of multiculturality and gender equality, as well as in terms of the degree of prescription contained in the principles they espouse.

The SRA's aim is to promote ethical practice in research by offering these guidelines as advice on best practice for individual members, employing research organisations and related professional associations. Such organisations will have their own sanctionable professional codes which may be mandatory with regard to some aspects of research practice. The SRA's guidelines are intended to inform and advise. Consequently, the current guidelines have been reviewed for consistency with other ethical codes across the profession. (Such as those provided by the MRS, IQS, MARQESA, BSA, and BPS.) Links to such guides and codes are offered in Section 9 of these guidelines. The SRA has also been a key partner in a European project designed to establish a voluntary code of practice covering the conduct of socio-economic research in Europe – RESPECT. Many of the elements of the SRA's guidelines have been extended

and developed in accordance with European law and the results of this work can be found at: www.respectproject.org

The Executive Committee of the SRA is charged with ensuring that these and future versions of the ethical guidelines should have clearly identified authors and be updated regularly to account for changes in practice as well as changes in relevant legislation.

These guidelines have been produced and disseminated in a printed version by the SRA to encourage their dissemination and practical use in furtherance of the profession of social research. Further comments from practitioners are welcomed in the spirit of maintaining ethical awareness.

Ron Iphofen
(November 2003)

Introduction to Ethical Guidelines

Social researchers work within a variety of economic, cultural, legal and political settings, each of which influences the emphasis and focus of their research. They also work within one of several different branches of their discipline, each involving its own techniques and procedures and its own ethical approach. Many social researchers work in fields such as economics, psychology, sociology, medicine, whose practitioners have ethical conventions that may influence the conduct of researchers and their fields. Even within the same setting and branch of social research, individuals may have different moral precepts that guide their work. Thus no declaration could successfully impose a rigid set of rules to which social researchers everywhere should be expected to adhere, and this document does not attempt to do so.

The aim of these guidelines is to enable the social researcher's individual ethical judgements and decisions to be informed by shared values and experience, rather than to be imposed by the profession. The guidelines therefore seek to document widely held principles of research and to identify the factors which obstruct their implementation. They are framed in the recognition that, on occasions, the operation of one principle will impede the operation of another, that social researchers, in common with other occupational groups, have competing obligations not all of which can be fulfilled simultaneously. Thus, implicit or explicit choices between principles will sometimes have to be made. The guidelines do not attempt to resolve these choices or to allocate greater priority to one of the principles than to another. Instead, they offer a framework within which the conscientious social researcher should, for the most part, be able to work comfortably. Where departures from the framework of principles are contemplated, they should be the result of deliberation rather than of ignorance.

The guidelines' first intention is thus to be informative and descriptive rather than authoritarian or rigidly prescriptive. The case for an educational code of this type is argued more fully in Jowell (1983). Secondly, they are designed to be applicable as far as possible to different areas of methodology and application. For this reason the provisions are fairly broadly drawn. Thirdly, although the principles are framed so as to have wider application to decisions than to the issues specifically mentioned, the guidelines are by no means exhaustive. They are written with full acknowledgement that they will require periodic updating and amendment by the SRA. Fourthly, neither the principles nor the commentaries are concerned with general written or unwritten rules or norms such as compliance with the law or the need for probity. The guidelines restrict themselves as far as possible to matters of specific concern to social research.

How to use these guidelines

This update of the guidelines aims to take account of suggestions made about the 2002 update. Commentators suggested a variety of ways in which they could be made more user-friendly, workable in practice and encouraging to new researchers and students of social research.

Consequently the text is divided into nine sections. The core of the ethical code can be found in Sections 1 to 5. These first five sections should be approached on three different "levels" of accessibility. Level A is a simple basic statement of the basic principles of the SRA's ethical "code". The next level – B – expands each of the elements of the basic code to explain why each element is important to the maintenance of ethical practice and at this level the vital educational and discursive part of the guidelines are to be found. The emboldened sections in Level B are particularly useful in pinpointing the essential principles and the dilemmas. These are followed by short

commentaries on the conflicts and difficulties inherent in the operation of the core principles – here the dilemmas of ethical decision making in social research are raised and considered in detail. Level C contains short annotated bibliographies for those who wish to pursue the issues or to consult more detailed texts.

The basic ethical principles are interrelated and may well conflict with one another in certain circumstances. Therefore they need to be considered together; their order of presentation should not be taken as an order of precedence.

The final sections (6 onwards) offer practical advice and guidance for engaging in ethical research and offer useful contacts and references for further reading that might aid the researcher in making difficult decisions.

LEVEL A

The core principles summarised at this level should not be read or adopted in isolation. They are highlighted here as a convenient way of alerting the reader to the relevant content of the full code. The nature of an educational code demands that the fuller versions in Levels B and C be consulted before the reader can be satisfied with these summary principles on their own.

1. Obligations to Society

If social research is to remain of benefit to society and the groups and individuals within it, then social researchers must conduct their work responsibly and in light of the moral and legal order of the society in which they practice. They have a responsibility to maintain high scientific standards in the methods employed in the collection and analysis of data and the impartial assessment and dissemination of findings.

2. Obligations to Funders and Employer

Researchers' relationship with and commitments to funders and/or employers should be clear and balanced. These should not compromise a commitment to morality and to the law and to the maintenance of standards commensurate with professional integrity.

3. Obligations to Colleagues

Social research depends upon the maintenance of standards and of appropriate professional behaviour that is shared amongst the professional research community. Without compromising obligations to funders/employers, subjects or society at large, this requires methods, procedures and findings to be open to collegial review. It also requires concern for the safety and security of colleagues when conducting field research.

4. Obligations to Subjects

Social researchers must strive to protect subjects from undue harm arising as a consequence of their participation in research. This requires that subjects' participation should be voluntary and as fully informed as possible and no group should be disadvantaged by routinely being excluded from consideration.

LEVEL B

1. OBLIGATIONS TO SOCIETY

The integrity and conduct of social research is dependent upon the cumulative behaviour of individual researchers and the consequences of their actions in society at large. In general, researchers have an obligation to conform to the ethical standards of the society in which they conduct their work. In particular, researchers have an obligation to ensure that they are informed about the appropriate legislation of the country in which they are conducting research and how that legislation might affect the conduct of their research. Researchers should not knowingly contravene such legislation.

In most contemporary societies there are threats to the scope of social enquiry from legislative pressure intended to protect the rights of individuals. Such legislation may lead to diluted research activity as a consequence of the fear of litigation. In the course of time case law is likely to resolve legal uncertainties about acceptable practice, but waiting for test cases can halt progress and limit the assumed benefits to society of social research activity. Any dilemmas arising from the contradictions of data protection, human rights and scientific research legislation can only be resolved by the judgements of individual members of the research community in the short term.

Concern for individual rights needs to be balanced against the benefits to society that may accrue from research activity. Such ethical conflicts are inevitable. Above all, however, researchers should not automatically assume that their priorities are shared by society in general.

1.1 Widening the scope of social research

Social researchers should use the possibilities open to them to extend the scope of social enquiry and communicate their findings, for the benefit of the widest possible community.

Social researchers develop and use concepts and techniques for the collection, analysis or interpretation of data. Although they are not always in a position to determine their work or the way in which their data are ultimately disseminated and used, they are frequently able to influence these matters (see clause 4.1).

Academic researchers enjoy probably the greatest degree of autonomy over the scope of their work and the dissemination of the results. Even so, they are generally dependent on the decision of funding agencies on the one hand and journal editors on the other for the direction and publication of their enquiries.

Social researchers employed in the public sector and those employed in commerce and industry tend to have less autonomy over what they do or how their data are utilised. Rules of secrecy may apply; pressure may be exerted to withhold or delay the publication of findings (or of certain findings); inquiries may be introduced or discontinued for reasons that have little to do with technical considerations. In these cases the final authority for decisions about an inquiry may rest with the employer or client (see clause 2.3).

Professional experience in many countries suggests that social researchers are most likely to avoid restrictions being placed on their work when they are able to stipulate in advance the issues over which they should maintain control. Government researchers may, for example, gain agreement to announce dates for publication for various statistical series, thus creating an obligation to publish the data on the due dates regardless of intervening political factors. Similarly, researchers in commercial contracts may

specify that control over at least some of the findings (or details of methods) will rest in their hands rather than with their clients. The greatest problems seem to occur when such issues remain unresolved until the data emerge.

1.2 Considering conflicting interests

Social enquiry is predicated on the belief that greater access to well grounded information will serve rather than threaten the interests of society. Nonetheless, in planning all phases of an inquiry, from design to presentation of findings, social researchers should consider the likely consequences for society at large, groups and categories of persons within it, respondents or other subjects, and possible future research.

No generic formula or guidelines exist for assessing the likely benefit or risk of various types of social enquiry. Nonetheless, social researchers must be sensitive to the possible consequences of their work and should as far as possible, guard against predictably harmful effects (see clause 4.4).

The fact that information can be misconstrued or misused is not in itself a convincing argument against its collection and dissemination. All information, whether systematically collected or not, is subject to misuse and no information can be considered devoid of possible harm to one interest or another. Individuals may be harmed by their participation in social inquiries (again see clause 4.4), or group interests may be damaged by certain findings. A particular district may, for instance, be negatively stereotyped by an inquiry that finds that it contains a very high incidence of crime. A group interest may also be harmed by social or political action based on research. For instance, heavier policing of a district in which crime is found to be high may be introduced at the expense of lighter policing in low crime districts. Such a move may be of aggregate benefit to society but to the detriment of some districts.

Social researchers may not be in a position to prevent action based upon their findings. They should, however, attempt to pre-empt likely misinterpretations and to counteract them when they occur. But to guard against the use of their findings would be to disparage the very purpose of much social enquiry.

1.3 Pursuing objectivity

While social researchers operate within the value systems of their societies, they should attempt to uphold their professional integrity without fear or favour. They must also not engage or collude in selecting methods designed to produce misleading results, or in misrepresenting findings by commission or omission.

Research can never be entirely objective, and social research is no exception. The selection of topics for attention may reflect a systematic bias in favour of certain cultural or personal values. In addition, the employment base of the researcher, the source of funding and a range of other factors may impose certain priorities, obligations and prohibitions. Even so, the social researcher is never free of a responsibility to pursue objectivity and to be open about known barriers to its achievement. In particular social researchers are bound by a professional obligation to resist approaches to problem formulation, data collection or analysis, interpretation and publication of results that are likely (explicitly or implicitly) to misinform or to mislead rather than to advance knowledge.

2. OBLIGATIONS TO FUNDERS AND EMPLOYERS

Most social research depends on specific prior funding, which carries with it certain mutual obligations. The general content of a researcher's obligations may be found throughout these guidelines. But some specific obligations arise in commissioning contracts handled at the

organisational level, and it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that such commitments do not compromise their own personal ethical and methodological standards.

Employing organisations must in turn bear responsibility for their employees' interests Thus they should not accept contractual conditions that are contingent upon a particular outcome from a proposed inquiry, such as guaranteed response rates or a previously conceived outcome. But individual researchers should also consider the personal consequences for themselves. The rest of section 2 is written from the perspective of positions to be taken by the individual researcher.

2.1 Clarifying obligations and roles

Social researchers should clarify in advance the respective obligations of employer or funder and social researcher; they should, for example, refer the employer or funder to the relevant parts of a professional code to which they adhere. Reports of findings should (where appropriate) specify their role.

2.2 Assessing alternatives impartially

Social researchers should consider the available methods and procedures for addressing a proposed inquiry and should provide the funder or employer with an impartial assessment of the respective merits and demerits of alternatives.

2.3 Guarding privileged information

Social researchers are frequently furnished with information by the funder or employer who may legitimately require it to be kept confidential. Methods and procedures that have been utilised to produce published data should not, however, be kept confidential.

An essential theme underlying each of the above principles is that a common interest exists between funder or employer and the social researcher as long as the aim of the social enquiry is to advance knowledge (see clause 1.1).

Although such knowledge may on occasions be sought for the limited benefit of the funder or employer, even that cause is best served if the inquiry is conducted in an atmosphere conducive to high professional standards. The relationship should therefore be such as to enable social enquiry to be undertaken as objectively as possible (see clause 1.3) with a view to providing information or explanations rather than advocacy.

The independent researcher or consultant appears to enjoy greater latitude than the employee researcher to insist on the application of certain professional principles. The relationship between an independent researcher and funder may be subject to a specific contract in which roles and obligations may be specified in advance (see Deming, 1972). Employee researchers' contracts, by contrast, are not project-specific and generally comprise an explicit or implicit obligation to accept instructions from the employer. The employee researcher in the public sector may be restricted further by statutory regulations covering such matters as compulsory surveys and official secrecy (see clause 4.4).

In reality, however, the distinction between the independent researcher and the employee researcher is blurred by other considerations. The independent researcher's discretion to insist on certain conditions is frequently curtailed by financial constraints and by the insecurity of the consultant's status. These problems apply less to the employee researcher, whose base is generally more secure and whose position is less isolated.

The employee (particularly the researcher in government service) is often part of a community of researchers who are in a strong position to establish conventions

and procedures that comfortably accommodate their professional goals (see clause 1.1).

Relationships with employers or funders involve mutual responsibilities.

The funder or employer is entitled to expect from social researchers a command of their discipline, candour in relation to limits of their expertise and of their data (see clause 3.1), openness about the availability of more cost-effective approaches to a proposed inquiry, and discretion with confidential information. Social researchers are entitled to expect from a funder or employer a respect for their exclusive professional and technical domain and for the integrity of the data. Whether or not these obligations can be built into contracts or written specifications, they remain preconditions of a mutually beneficial relationship.

A conflict of obligations may occur when the funder of an inquiry wishes to ensure in advance (say in a contract) that certain results will be achieved, such as a particular finding or a minimum response level in a voluntary sample survey. By agreeing to such a contract the researcher would be pre-empting the results of the inquiry by having made implicit guarantees on behalf of potential subjects as to their propensity to participate or the direction of their response. To fulfil these guarantees, the researcher would then have to compromise other principles, such as the principle of informed consent (see clause 4.2).

Social researchers have a responsibility to ensure that the quality of their "product" is maintained. Research cannot be exempt from quality assurance procedures. High quality research demands high qualities in ethical standards and a concern to ensure that procedures agreed to at the design stage are maintained throughout a project.

Above all, social researchers should attempt to ensure that funders and employers appreciate the obligations that social researchers have not only to them, but

also to society at large, to subjects, to professional colleagues and collaborators. One of the responsibilities of the social researcher's professional citizenship, for instance, is to be open about methods in order that the research community at large can assess, and benefit from their application. Thus, in so far as is practicable, methodological components of inquiries should be free from confidentiality restrictions so that they can form part of the common intellectual property of the profession (see clause 3.2).

3. OBLIGATIONS TO COLLEAGUES

3.1 Maintaining confidence in research

Social researchers depend upon the confidence of the public. They should in their work attempt to promote and preserve such confidence without exaggerating the accuracy or explanatory power of their findings.

3.2 Exposing and reviewing their methods and findings

Within the limits of confidentiality requirements social researchers should provide adequate information about their methods to colleagues to permit procedures, techniques and findings to be assessed by others. Such assessments should be directed at the methods themselves rather than at the individuals who selected or used them.

3.3 Communicating ethical principles

To conduct certain inquiries social researchers need to collaborate with colleagues in other disciplines, as well as interviewers, clerical staff, students, etc. In these cases social researchers should make their own ethical principles clear and take account of the ethical principles of their collaborators.

Each of these principles stems from the notion that social researchers derive their status and certain privileges of access to data not only by their personal standing but also by virtue of their professional citizenship. In acknowledging membership of a wider social research community, they owe various obligations to that community and can expect consideration from it.

The reputation of social research inevitably depends less on what professional bodies of social researchers assert about their ethical norms than on the actual conduct of individual researchers. In considering the methods, procedures, content and reporting of their enquiries, researchers should therefore try to ensure that they leave a research field in a state which permits further access by researchers in the future (see clause 4.1).

Social inquiries are frequently collaborative efforts among colleagues of different levels of seniority and from different disciplines. The reputation and careers of all contributors need to be taken into account. The social researcher should also attempt to ensure that social inquiries are conducted within an agreed ethical framework, perhaps incorporating principles or conventions from other disciplines, and that each contributor's role is sufficiently well defined. The World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki (1975), for instance, gives excellent guidance to researchers working in the field of medicine.

A principle of all scientific work is that it should be open to scrutiny, assessment and possible validation by fellow scientists. Particular attention should be given to this principle when using computer software packages for analysis by providing as much detail as possible. Any perceived advantage of withholding details of techniques or findings, say for competitive reasons, needs to be weighed against the potential disservice of such action to the advancement of knowledge. In fact any principled suggestion about "meeting obligations to colleagues" may

be compromised by other competitive pressures which apply throughout the scientific community: competitive tendering, scarcity of funding sources, priority disputes etc.

There is a delicate balance to be maintained between professional integrity and the need for the autonomous action and independent judgement of researchers, against accountability for research interventions which may have consequences for professional colleagues. Some form of independent ethical review is proposed as the best mechanism for addressing this (see Section 5). This in itself cannot absolve researchers from addressing moral dilemmas entailed in their work for themselves, as well as part of a community of peers.

One of the most important but difficult responsibilities of social researchers is that of alerting potential users of their data to the limits of the reliability and applicability of that data. The twin dangers of either overstating or understating the validity or degree to which the data can be generalised are nearly always present. No general guidelines can be drawn except for a counsel of caution. Confidence in research findings depends critically on their faithful representation. Attempts by researchers to cover up errors (see Ryten, 1983), or to invite over-interpretation, may not only rebound on the researchers concerned but also on the reputation of social research in general (see clause 1.2). The reputation of each is maintained by the actions of all.

3.4 Ensuring safety and minimising risk of harm to field researchers

Social researchers have a moral obligation to attempt to minimise the risk of physical and/or mental harm to themselves and to their colleagues from the conduct of research. Research managers may, in addition, have a legal obligation in terms of health and safety regulations to ensure that risk to field researchers is minimised.

While it has to be acknowledged that risk is a part of everyday life, it is also certainly the case that some research activities may place the researcher in the field in some degree of extra risk of physical and/or mental harm. Where possible research managers should anticipate the risks and ensure that field researchers are protected, as far as possible, from dangers in the field.

The qualitative study of dangerous or threatening groups may place the researcher in some situations of particular personal risk, but all research entailing direct contact with the public presents a risk potential. Researchers should maintain awareness of such risk to themselves and their colleagues and make every effort to diminish the dangers.

4. OBLIGATIONS TO SUBJECTS

In a very general sense meeting all of the preceding obligations as well as obligations to subjects requires that care is taken with research design. Poor design and trivial or foolish studies can waste people's time and can contaminate the field for future research. Thus research design in itself raises many ethical considerations.

It may be the case that the general public and potential research subjects do not perceive confidentiality as likely to be so rigorously maintained as ethical social researchers would like. Even if research subjects do not perceive any danger to themselves of data disclosure, nevertheless it is the task of the researcher to maintain principles of confidentiality as far as possible so that the interests of subjects are protected (See 4.4).

4.1 Avoiding undue intrusion

Social researchers must strive to be aware of the intrusive potential of their work. They have no special entitlement to study all phenomena. The advancement of knowledge and the pursuit of Information are not

themselves sufficient justifications for overriding other social and cultural values.

Some forms of social enquiry may appear to be more intrusive than others. For instance, statistical samples may be selected without the knowledge or consent of their members; contact may be sought with subjects without advance warning; questions may be asked which cause distress or offence; people may be observed without their knowledge; and information about individuals or groups may be obtained from third parties. In essence, people may be inconvenienced or aggrieved by enquiries in a variety of ways, many of which are difficult to avoid or to anticipate although the researcher would be behaving responsibly by the subsequent seeking of informed consent for participation in the research (see also clause 1.3).

One way of avoiding inconvenience to potential subjects is to make more use of available data instead of embarking on a new inquiry. For instance, the preferred option would be to make greater statistical use of administrative records by conducting secondary analysis of existing data for which informed consent had been granted. By linking existing records, valuable social research information may be produced that would otherwise have to be collected afresh. But there are often issues of confidentiality in linking records which may affect what can be done. Individual subjects should not be affected by such uses provided that their identities are protected and that the purpose is statistical, not administrative. On the other hand, subjects who have provided data for one purpose may object to its subsequent use for another purpose without their knowledge (see clauses 4.3 iii, 4.6. and 4.7). This is particularly sensitive in the case of identified data. Decisions in such cases have to be based on a variety of competing interests and in the knowledge that there is no "correct" solution (see clause 4.4). Under the UK Data Protection Act one can use data collected for one purpose for other statistical and research purposes without explicit

informed consent. This is assumed to be granted under the process for collection of the original data. The key concern is that there should be no unanticipated consequences for the original data subject.

As Cassell (1982b) argues, people can feel wronged without being harmed by research: they may feel they have been treated as objects of measurement without respect for their individual values and sense of privacy. In many of the social enquiries that have caused controversy, the issue has had more to do with intrusion into subjects' private and personal domains, or by overburdening subjects by collecting "too much" information, rather than with whether or not subjects have been harmed. In some cases a researcher's attitudes, demeanour or even their latent theoretical or methodological perspective can be interpreted as doing an injustice to subjects. Examples include an offhand manner on the part of a survey interviewer or studies which depend upon some form of social disruption. By exposing subjects to a sense of being wronged, perhaps by such attitudes, by such approaches, by the methods of selection or by causing them to acquire self knowledge that they did not seek or want, social researchers are vulnerable to criticism. Participants' resistance to future social enquiries in general may also increase as a consequence of such 'inconsiderateness' (see also clauses 3.1, 4.3c, 4.6 and 4.7). (See Ehrich 2001 for more explicit examples.)

4.2 Obtaining informed consent

Inquiries involving human subjects should be based as far as practicable on the freely given informed consent of subjects. Even if participation is required by law, it should still be as informed as possible. In voluntary inquiries, subjects should not be under the impression that they are required to participate. They should be aware of their entitlement to refuse at any stage for whatever reason and to withdraw data just supplied.

Information that would be likely to affect a subject's willingness to participate should not be deliberately withheld, since this would remove from subjects an important means of protecting their own interests.

Gaining informed consent is a procedure for ensuring that research subjects
understand what is being done to them, the limits to their participation and awareness of any potential risks they incur. The principle of informed consent from subjects is necessarily vague, since it depends for its interpretation on unstated assumptions about the amount of information and the nature of consent required to constitute acceptable practice. The amount of information needed to ensure that a subject is adequately informed about the purpose and nature of an inquiry is bound to vary from study to study. No universal rules can be framed. At one extreme it is inappropriate to overwhelm potential subjects with unwanted and incomprehensible details about the origin and content of a social inquiry. At the other extreme it is inappropriate to withhold material facts or to mislead subjects about such matters (see clauses 4.3d and 4.4). The appropriate information requirement clearly falls somewhere between these positions but its precise location depends on circumstances. The clarity and comprehensibility of the information provided are as important as the quantity.

An assessment needs to be made of what information is likely to be material to a subject's willingness to participate. Examples of what might be considered appropriate information can be seen in the checklist in Section 7. In selecting from such a list, the social researcher should consider not only those items that he or she regards as material, but those which the potential subject is likely to regard as such. Each party may well have special (and different) interests. As a means of supplementing the information selected, the social researcher may choose to give potential subjects a

declaration of their entitlements (see Jowell, 1983) which informs them of their right to information but leaves the selection of extra details in the subject's control.

Just as the specification of adequate information varies, so does the specification of adequate consent. A subject's participation in a study may be based on reluctant acquiescence rather than on enthusiastic co-operation. In some cases, the social researcher may feel it is appropriate to encourage a sense of duty to participate in order to minimise volunteer bias. The boundary between tactical persuasion and duress is sometimes very fine and is probably easier to recognise in practice than to stipulate. In any event, the most specific generic statement that can be made about adequate consent is that it falls short both of implied coercion and of full-hearted participation.

On occasions, a "gatekeeper" blocks access to subjects so that researchers cannot approach them directly without the gatekeeper's permission. In these cases, social researchers should not devolve their responsibility to protect the subject's interests on to the gatekeeper. They should also be wary of inadvertently disturbing the relationship between subject and gatekeeper. While respecting the gatekeeper's legitimate interests they should adhere to the principle of obtaining informed consent directly from subjects once they have gained access to them. The principle of informed consent is, in essence, an expression of belief in the need for truthful and respectful exchanges between social researchers and human subjects. It is clearly not a precondition of all social enquiry. Equally it remains an important and highly valued professional norm. The acceptability of social research depends increasingly not only on technical considerations but also on the willingness of social researchers to accord respect to their subjects and to treat them with consideration (see clause 4.1).

A major limitation upon gaining informed consent lies with "vulnerable" populations. Such groups include children, those with an intellectual disability, or those in a dependent relationship to the researcher or commissioning body. College students, for example, are a frequently studied group who may find difficulty in resisting co-operation. In conducting research with vulnerable populations, extra care must be taken to protect their rights and ensure that their compliance is freely entered in to. Some would argue that sending a field researcher to ask a subject to participate in a study does not constitute informed consent since the researcher is seeking to persuade the subject to participate. The degree of "persuasion" might be enhanced with vulnerable groups.

In order to protect the researcher from accusations of failing to secure informed consent a practice has grown of having subjects sign a consent form. While this may serve as some indication that the subject understands some of the implications of their consent to participate it may also compromise principles of confidentiality and anonymity – equally valuable an obligation to subjects (see clause 4.7). Signed consent forms might only be appropriate for longitudinal and/or more intrusive studies. Both researcher and subject could gain extra protection from having a witness to the process of informed consent, but this does raise resource implications.

In general, researchers should be explicit about their rationale for gaining consent and upon how "informed" their subjects can be considered to be. It may be impossible to anticipate all potential harm to the subject from participation in a study – subjects in clinical trials, for example, are not guaranteed protection from harm. But there should, at least, be clarity about opt-in and opt-out arrangements, about the length and degree of commitment required of respondents, and about the precise goals of the research. Adequate subject de-briefing also seems essential to this last aim.

4.3 Modifications to informed consent

As a consequence of data base enhancements and the 'matching' or 'fusion' of data sets the probabilities of disclosure of participants' identities has been increased in recent years so that it becomes harder to guarantee anonymity. The release of non-anonymised data, such as in sharing data between governmental agencies when the identities of individuals could be discovered, should be agreed with participants in advance. This may not be necessary when there are adequate safeguards to ensure that confidentiality is ensured. Where technical or practical considerations inhibit the achievement of prior informed consent from subjects, the spirit of this principle should be adhered to. For example:

a) Respecting rights in observation studies

In observation studies, where behaviour patterns are observed without the subject's knowledge, social researchers must take care not to infringe what may be referred to as the "private space" of an individual or group. This will vary from culture to culture. Where practicable, social researchers should attempt to obtain consent post hoc. In any event, they should interpret behaviour patterns that appear deliberately to make observation difficult as a tacit refusal of permission to be observed.

b) Dealing with proxies

In cases where a proxy is utilised to answer questions on behalf of a subject, say because access to the subject is uneconomic or because the subject is too ill or too young to participate directly, care should be taken not to infringe the 'private space' of the subject or to disturb the relationship between subject and proxy. Where indications exist or emerge that the subject would object to certain Information being disclosed, such information must not be sought by proxy.

c) Secondary use of records

In cases where subjects are not approached for consent because a social researcher has been granted access, say, to administrative or medical records or other research material for a new or supplementary inquiry, the custodian's permission to use the records should not relieve the researcher from having to consider the likely reactions, sensitivities and interests of the subjects concerned. Where possible and appropriate, subjects could be approached afresh for consent to any new enquiry. (Although this is not required under the UK Data Protection Act as long as there are no additional consequences for the data subject.) There now exist extremely thorough guidelines for best practice on the secondary use of data, these should be consulted by all researchers interested in the sharing, preservation and analysis of archived data (University of Essex and Royal Statistical Society, 2002).

d) Misleading potential subjects

In studies where the measurement objectives preclude the prior disclosure of material information to subjects, social researchers must weigh up the likely consequences of any proposed deception. To withhold material information from, or to misinform, subjects involves a deceit, whether by omission or commission, temporarily or permanently. Such manipulation will face legitimate censure and must not be contemplated unless it can be justified. Instead, consideration should be given to informing subjects in advance that material information is being withheld, and when or if such information will be disclosed.

A serious problem arises for social researchers when methodological requirements conflict with the requirement of informed consent. Many cases exist in which the provision of background information to subjects (say, about the purpose or sponsorship of a study), or even the process of alerting them to the fact that they are subjects (as in observation studies), would be likely to produce a change or reaction that would defeat or interfere with

the objective of the measurement. These difficulties may lead social researchers to waive informed consent and to adopt either covert measurement techniques or deliberate deception in the interests of accuracy.

The principles above urge extreme caution in these cases and advise social researchers to respect the imputed wishes of the subjects. Thus, in observation studies or in studies involving proxies, the principle to be followed is that mere indications of reluctance on the part of an uninformed or unconsenting subject should be taken as a refusal to participate. Any other course of action would be likely to demonstrate a lack of respect for the subject's interests and to undermine the relationship between, say, proxy and subject on the one hand, and between researcher and subject on the other.

The US Office for Protection from Research Risks allows observational research to be exempt from consent unless:

a) "information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and

b) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation."

Cultural variations as to what constitutes "public" and what "private" space must be acknowledged in covert, unobtrusive observational studies. Once established, there can be no reasonable guarantee of privacy in "public" settings since anyone from journalists to ordinary members of the public may constitute "observers" of such human behaviour and any data collected thereby would remain, in any case, beyond the control of the subjects observed.

Social enquiries involving deliberate deception of subjects (by omission or commission) are rare and extremely

difficult to defend. Clear methodological advantages exist for deception in some psychological studies, for instance, where revealing the purpose would tend to bias the responses. But as Diener and Crandall (1978) have argued, "science itself is built upon the value of truth"; thus deception by scientists will tend to destroy their credibility and standing (see clause 3.1). If deception were widely practised in social inquiries, subjects would, in effect, be taught not to "trust those who by social contract are deemed trustworthy and whom they need to trust" (Baumrind 1972).

Nonetheless, it would be as unrealistic to outlaw deception in social enquiry as it would be to outlaw it in social interaction. Minor deception is employed in many forms of human contact (tact, flattery etc.) and social researchers are no less likely than the rest of the population to be guilty of such practices. It remains the duty of social researchers and their collaborators, however, not to pursue methods of enquiry that are likely to infringe human values and sensibilities. To do so, whatever the methodological advantages, would be to endanger the reputation of social research and the mutual trust between social researchers and society which is a prerequisite for much research (see clause 3.1).

Covert observation and any other forms of research which use deception can only be justified where there is no other ethically sound way of collecting accurate and appropriate data. If research requires any kind of deception, then only by the clear demonstration of the benefits of the research can it be justified.

In cases where informed consent cannot be acquired in advance, there is usually a strong case, for the reasons above, for seeking it post hoc. Once the methodological advantage of covert observation, of deception, or of withholding information has been achieved, it is rarely defensible to allow the omission to stand.

4.4 Protecting the interests of subjects

Neither consent from the subjects nor the legal requirement to participate absolves the social researcher from an obligation to protect the subject as far as possible against potentially harmful effects of participating. The social researcher should try to minimise disturbance both to subjects themselves and to the subjects' relationships with their environment. Social researchers should help subjects to protect their own interests by giving them prior information about the consequences of participating (see clause 4.2).

Harm to subjects may arise from undue stress through participation, loss of self esteem, psychological injury or other side effects. Various factors may be important in assessing the risk benefit ratio of a particular inquiry, such as the probability of risk, the number of people at risk, the severity of the potential harm, the anticipated utility of the findings, few of which are usually quantifiable (see Levine, 1978).

The interests of subjects may also be harmed by virtue of their membership of a group or section of society (see clause 1.2). Consequently social researchers can rarely claim that a prospective inquiry is devoid of possible harm to subjects. They may be able to claim that, as individuals, subjects will be protected by the device of anonymity. But, as members of a group or indeed as members of society itself, no subject can be exempted from the possible effects of decisions based on research.

When the probability or potential severity of harm is great, social researchers face a more serious dilemma. A social researcher may, for instance, be involved in a medical experiment in which risks to subjects of some magnitude are present. If volunteers can be found who have been told of risks, and if the researcher is convinced of the importance of the experiment, should he or she nonetheless oppose the experiment in view of the risk? In

these circumstances, probably the best advice is to seek advice from colleagues and others, especially from those who are not themselves parties to the study or experiment.

The major UK legislation to have a potential effect in this area is the Human Rights Act 1998 (which came into force in October 2000). The Act incorporates into UK law rights and freedoms guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights. Strictly it applies to action by "public authorities" so it should not directly affect research conducted by private and independent research organisations – unless such work is being carried out on behalf of a Government department. However, in e-mail communication the Human Rights Unit has suggested that the full implications of the Act for social research are as yet unclear and untested: "The Act does not specifically cover issues of research. Some of the Convention rights may have indirect implications for research policy, but this depends on the individual case. Whether a particular research organisation might be regarded as a 'public authority' for the purposes of the Act would also depend very much on the individual circumstances." So it is too soon to tell what the likely effects on research practice of such legislation might be. Further information can be gained directly from the Human Rights Unit on: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/hract/

In fact, the UK Medical Research Council have issued a thorough and comprehensive guidance document – Personal Information in Medical Research – which offers advice of use to all researchers working with personal data of any kind. This document can be found on: http://www.mrc.ac.uk/ethics_a.html

4.5 *Enabling participation*

Social researchers have a responsibility to ensure inclusion in research projects of relevant individuals or groups who might otherwise be excluded for reasons of communication, disability, comprehension or expense.

Some people are likely to be excluded from opportunities to take part in research unless social researchers routinely offer to make arrangements that fit with particular requirements. What this means in practice is paying attention to the potential need for language interpretation, signers, or communication aids; potential respondents' requirements for flexibility in appointment times and length of interviews, and, in some limited situations, preference for an interviewer of particular gender and/or ethnic background. Correspondence about research, including invitations and information sheets should be sent in large print using Plain English and, where relevant, in minority ethnic group languages, in Braille or on audio cassettes. Some people may only be able to take part if costs are met for expenses incurred in travelling to venues, or child/adult care required for their participation.

Such issues should be considered at the design stage of the research. There are resource implications for research budgets in adopting such strategies, and researchers have a responsibility to explain the issues to funders. There is increasing understanding of such obligations among research funders, who also understand how findings are strengthened by adopting approaches that improve representativeness.

There are particular issues in respect of research involving people with learning difficulties or sensory/communication impairments, and children, where there is an obligation on the researcher to find the most appropriate medium of communication to enable participation. Relying solely on verbal methods of communication is likely to exclude some children, and some disabled people.

4.6 Maintaining confidentiality of records

Research data are unconcerned with individual identities. They are collected to answer questions such as 'how many?' or 'what proportion?' not 'who?'. The identities and records of co-operating (or non-co-operating) subjects must therefore be kept confidential, whether or not confidentiality has been explicitly pledged.

Data that does not enable identification should not be passed on without consent and should be stored safely with restricted access. The requirements of data protection and human rights legislation together with modern computer technology make this principle harder to maintain with complete security. Researchers must be clear about who should and who should not be able to gain access to information about identifiable individuals and what grounds are reasonable for them doing so. Data should not routinely be released to clients (even responsible public authorities) in any form that could identify respondents, unless explicit consent was given by the respondents and guarantees of anonymity and/or confidentiality had not been made. Thus, for example, it should be made clear in "informed consent" information to subjects that complex data sets with postcodes and other geographic identifiers applied to case records could be used to identify individuals.

Although it has to be acknowledged that some risk of disclosure is always present, researchers should at least guarantee that they have taken all reasonable steps to prevent the disclosure of identities as in 4.7.

4.7 Preventing disclosure of identities

Social researchers should take appropriate measures to prevent their data from being published or otherwise released in a form that would allow any subject's identity to be disclosed or inferred. The disclosure of

identity in itself represents a potential risk of harm to a subject. Researchers cannot however be held responsible for any subject that freely chooses to reveal their participation in a study.

There can be no absolute safeguards against breaches of confidentiality – that is, the disclosure of identified or identifiable data in contravention of an implicit or explicit obligation to the source. Respondents should be informed if their data is to be deposited in a data archive. Data deposited with data archives are usually subject to specific conditions for deposit and release. Many methods exist for lessening the likelihood of confidentiality breaches, the first of which is anonymity. Anonymous data should be distinct from non-disclosive data. Non-disclosure guarantees security. Anonymity helps to prevent unwitting breaches of confidentiality; as long as data travel incognito, they are more difficult to attach to individuals or organisations.

Although debatable, there is a case for identifiable data to be granted 'privileged' status in law so that access to them by third parties is legally blocked in the absence of the permission of the responsible social researchers (or their subjects). Even without such legal protection, however, it is the social researcher's responsibility to ensure that the identities of subjects are protected even when (or perhaps especially when) under pressure from authoritative sources to divulge identities (Grinyer 2001).

Neither the use of subject pseudonyms nor anonymity alone is any guarantee of confidentiality. A particular configuration of attributes can, like a fingerprint, frequently identify its owner beyond reasonable doubt. So social researchers need to remove the opportunities for others to infer identities from their data. They may decide to group data in such as way as to disguise identities (see Boruch & Cecil, 1979) or to employ a variety of available measures that seek to impede the detection of identities

without inflicting very serious damage to the aggregate dataset (see Flaherty, 1979). Some damage to analysis possibilities is unavoidable in these circumstances, but it needs to be weighed against the potential damage to the sources of data in the absence of such action (see Finney, 1984).

The widespread use of computers is often regarded as a threat to individuals and organisations because it provides new methods of disclosing and linking identified records. On the other hand, the social researcher could exploit the impressive capacity of modern information technology to disguise identities and to enhance data security.

Some subjects may wish their identities to be disclosed in order to maintain "ownership" of the data (Grinyer 2002) and, while the researcher has a responsibility to present the potential disadvantages of removing anonymity, they cannot be held responsible for subjects who choose to disclose their identities themselves. On the other hand the researcher should certainly resist requests for the identity disclosure of any individual subject or subjects when such disclosure could lead to the failure to preserve the anonymity of other subjects who choose not to disclose their identity.

5. ETHICS COMMITTEES AND IRB'S

With the growth of research governance serious consideration has to be given by researchers and by research organisations to the use of human subjects review committees (also known as Ethics Committees, or Institutional Review Boards (IRB's).

In some organisations and research sites, a formal "ethical review" must have taken place before researchers are allowed to conduct the research. Dilemmas of accountability and independence may have to be resolved when seeking permission from ethics committees. For

example, researchers in the USA have had problems with IRBs being more concerned about legal threats to the employing organisation than with the "benefits to society" (see Section 1) of the proposed research. Thus ethics committees may serve more as a means of institutional protection than operating in the interests of either subject or researcher. Over-protective and bureaucratic procedures can pose a danger of restricting valuable, particularly innovative, social research methods.

Medical or health service ethics committees may not fully understand the checks and balances of social research. To illustrate, there may be a difference over what precisely constitutes informed consent. Medical models can be inappropriate in social settings and vice versa. For example, allowing an interviewer to attempt to persuade people to take part in a study is regarded as coercion in social research and, therefore, not regarded as informed consent. In clinical trials, however, such persuasion is a common feature of subject recruitment.

Where they do not exist researchers should consider the establishment of ethics committees and the formal checks and safeguards to be gained from using them. In some areas and with some population types, subjecting a research proposal to a research ethics committee may be mandatory. In the UK for example any research on NHS staff or patients must be subject to local and/or regional committees for ethical approval. Even then, there are some anomalies which leaves a lot of responsibility in the hands of the researcher – there are no legal penalties or sanctions for not submitting for ethical approval or for not fulfilling the requirements of the ethics committee even though there may be organisational penalties for doing so.

There are some concerns about both the competence and the knowledge of some of these committees which can unnecessarily restrict research activity to the detriment of social scientific progress. Murray L. Wax, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Washington University,

Saint Louis, when testifying before the US National Bioethics Advisory Commission in April 2000 denied that anthropologists can do much harm to those they study, instead he said the "gravest ethical problem... is posed by unknowing and overzealous IRBs, and by governmental regulators attempting to force qualitative ethnographic studies into a biomedical mould." This has to be balanced against the need for researchers to accept ethical responsibility and to be seen to be formally ensuring that ethical obligations are fulfilled.

IRB's in the USA grew from the need to meet the requirements of the Nuremburg code established as guidelines for human subject research in response to the iniquities of the Nazi era. Legally they apply only to government research, but most non-governmental organisations apply the guidelines to their own procedures.

The primary function of an ethics committee is to apply the sorts of ethical standards and principles discussed in these SRA guidelines, and to maintain some form of institutional memory for decisions taken and permission given. Many believe that ethics committees apply only to "interventionist" research such as medical experiments or pharmaceutical trials. In fact most generalizable social research is interventionist – interviews and surveys are interventions in the life of the population studied and so should also be subject to ethical approval when possible.

One key function of an ethics committee may be to conduct a Project Audit. Thus after approval has been given for the project to be conducted a follow-up process will confirm whether or not the project has been completed or abandoned or if there are any difficulties with the study which were not anticipated in the original application. Some commentators suggest that, since ethical decision-taking may occur throughout the life of a project, ethics committees should maintain review of the project throughout and not consider their job as merely to cast ethical judgement at the outset. However, to avoid the 'big

brother' connotations of such a supervisory model, ethics committees should instead ensure at the outset ensure that researchers have established a system for the maintenance of ethical "awareness" throughout the project to allow for the occurrence of unanticipated ethical problems, or problems that could not have been foreseen at the outset. Researchers cannot assume that all ethical problems have been resolved when their project has been endorsed by formal ethical review.

Section 6 provides a list of the sorts of items considered by ethical approval committees. We offer it separately as an incentive for all researchers to check against any issues that emerge as worthy of ethical concern during the planning and design of a research project.

LEVEL C: Bibliography

Introduction: General works on social research ethics

Most modern general texts on research methods tend to include chapters on research ethics. Little of substance has been added to the extensive earlier ethical debates across the social and behavioural sciences, so most draw heavily upon earlier commentaries. For example, Bulmer (2001) in a succinct chapter draws upon most of the earlier work. Homans (1991) offers a comprehensive and readable summary of the issues to date while Sieber (1993) indicates how ethical responsibility can become endemic to the research process. Examples of good modern texts include: Pole and Lampard (2002); Newman (2000: 89-120); Bryman (2001:145) has many apt case study examples; Somer and Somer (2002: Ch.2) offer a succinct, rapid guide to ethical concerns; Babbie (2001) deals with ethical matters in terms of the specific problems facing different research methods; and May (2001: 46-68) links the debate to the problem of values and value judgements. All such texts are intended for the undergraduate (and above) reader. While most add little to fundamental ethical philosophy, most do have useful commentary upon legal and political issues and research relationships to social policy.

Those that do add something fundamental to the debate include Hammersley (2000) writing on partisanship and bias and pursuing some of Howard Becker's (1965) original questions on taking sides. Christians (2000) offers a comprehensive reconsideration of perennial ethical issues but with a particular focus upon a qualitative approach. In some cases ethical problematics are seen as central to the method and so permeate methodological discussion. These include action research (Reason and Bradbury 2001), social

experimentation (Orr 1999: 17-22), emancipatory research (Truman et al. 2000) and human rights research (Witkin in Truman et al. 2000).

On the whole research methods texts dealing with secondary data analysis make little, if any, reference to ethical matters. The most complete discussions are to be found in texts advocating particular forms of primary research. Recent joint work by the Royal Statistical Society and the UK Data Archive does make a valuable contribution to this area of concern (University of Essex and Royal Statistical Society, 2002).

Of the earlier works, Sjoberg (1967) provides good historical background. Freund (1969) is written under the shadow of the biomedical paradigm, but includes a vigorous statement by Margaret Mead of the differences, on the ethical dimension, between biomedical and social science research. Rynkiewich and Spradley (1976) is aimed at anthropologists working in or from America; Diener Crandall (1978) is a general discussion, particularly useful with reference to field experiments; Reynolds (1982), which is a condensed and updated version of Reynolds (1979), is a clearly written text aimed mainly at American university students. Bulmer (1979) contains articles on survey research and census taking in Britain and America. Barnes (1980) is an attempt to analyse sociologically why ethics has become problematic and has a full bibliography of work up to 1978. Bower and Gasparis (1978) has a bibliography of works published between 1965 and 1967 with particularly full annotations. Bulmer (1983) contains a good bibliography on covert research and related topics. Jowell (1983) states the case for an educational, rather than a regulatory or aspirational code, and has a bibliography with many items of special interest to statisticians. Burgess (1984) focuses on ethnographic research by sociologists in the U K. Barnes (1984) argues that ethical compromises are unavoidable in social enquiry.

For those interested in reading more about the philosophy of ethics within which the "applied" ethics of social research is conducted there are some useful introductory texts. Thompson (2000) provides a readable and straightforward introduction with lots of illustrative examples. La Follete (2002) is a comprehensive reader in applied ethics with contributions from most of the leading writers in the field.

1 OBLIGATIONS TO SOCIETY

Many books or symposia on professional ethics contain discussions on the broad context in which social enquiry is carried on, but in most cases these discussion are scattered throughout the text. Beauchamp et al. (1982) contains, in Part 2, an explicit general discussion of how and when the practice of social enquiry can or cannot be justified. The social researcher's legal and formal social obligations are analysed, in the United States context, in Beauchamp et al. (1982), Part 5. Pool (1979 & 1980) argues the case for not imposing any formal controls. Douglas (1979) does the same, more vigorously. Wax and Cassell (1981) discuss the relation between legal and other formal constraints and the social scientist's own set of values. It is perhaps in the area of social research in health that ethical considerations of social/individual benefits have been particularly raised. Byrne (1990) discusses ethical matters in relation to specific disease areas and types of research method. Weisstub (1999) considers the value of cross-fertilisation of ethical views between the biomedical and social and behavioural sciences. As a consequence shared standards are seen to have emerged in the field of social medicine where social researchers have become more informed about standards of clinical intervention while health researchers have raised awareness of relationships with and accountability for their subjects (King et al. 1999). Erwin et al. (1994) offer a compendium of papers from major writers in this field – again advocating the benefits

of cross-fertilisation of ideas. Indeed Romm (2000) extends the substantive debate by addressing issues of researcher accountability across a range of theoretical paradigms.

Widening the scope of social science: Diener and Crandall (1978, Chapter 13) discuss this topic with reference to psychological research. Crispo (1975) presents a discussion of public accountability from a Canadian standpoint. Johnson (1982) deals with the hazards that arise in publishing research findings. Jahoda (1981) demonstrates vividly the ethical and social considerations that limit the conduct of enquiry and the publication of results.

Considering conflicting interests: BAAS (1974) discusses these conflicts in a British, but now somehow out of date context. Baumrind (1972) contrasts the interests of scientists and research subjects, favouring the latter. Ackeroyd (1984, Section 6.3) deals with conflicts of interest in ethnographic enquiry. Dean (1996) confronts the dilemmas of social policy research.

Pursuing objectivity: Stocking and Dunwoody (1982) outline some of the pressures against the preservation of objective standards that are exerted by the mass media. In more general terms, Klaw (1970) suggests that these standards can never remain untarnished.

2 OBLIGATIONS TO FUNDERS AND EMPLOYERS

Clarifying obligations and roles: Appell (1978, Section 8) presents examples from ethnographic inquiries. Callender (1996) offers a general discussion on the limits to what can be studied and reported. Daly (2002) reviews the ethical consequences of the increasing commercialisation of research in universities and offers many illustrative case studies.

Assessing alternatives impartially: Many journal articles and chapters in books discuss this topic in general terms. Schuler (1982, Chapter 2) deals with the difficulties

encountered in psychological research. Webb et al. (1966 and 2000) is the popular source for alternative procedures of enquiry.

Pre-empting outcomes: Barnett (1963) discusses this point, with reference to the UK context.

Guarding privileged information: SCPR working party (1974) is a general discussion of privacy in a British context, although it is somewhat out of date. Simmel (1908: 337 402 & 1952: 305 376) is the classic sociological analysis of constraints on the flow of information. Shils (1967) extends Simmel's work to more recent conditions; Tefft (1980) provides exotic case studies of perceptions of privacy and secrecy. Flaherty (1979) discusses the issues posed by the monopolisation of data by governments, while Bulmer (1979) looks more broadly at data obtained in censuses and large surveys. Caroll and Kneer (1976) look, from the standpoint of political science in America, at official pressure on scientists to reveal sources of information. Appell (1979, Section 3) gives a range of dilemmas arising from various kinds of official pressure. Bok (1982) prescribes norms for concealment and revelation from a neo-Kantian standpoint.

3 OBLIGATIONS TO COLLEAGUES

Maintaining confidence in research: Reynolds (1975: 598, 604) discusses conflicts between, on the one hand, obligations to keep science objective and impartial and, on the other hand, values held as citizens about trying to change the world.

Exposing and reviewing methods and findings: Diener & Crandall (1978, Chapter 9) discuss the need for honesty and accuracy. Powell (1983) outlines the conflicts that arise when an academic researcher merits censure from colleagues because of improper professional conduct.

Communicating ethical principles: Appell (1978) deals with how to alert ethnographers to ethical issues.

Minimising Risk and Danger: Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000) summarise the physical, emotional, ethical and professional dangers of conducting qualitative research in particular, but many of these risks are generalisable to all research in which contact with the public is made and to research in potentially dangerous settings. Lee (1995) had already raised the issues associated with dangerous fieldwork and prompted a growing concern within the profession to include risk analysis within research planning, design and project management. The SRA has endorsed guidelines for field research safety produced by Craig et al. (2001) and which can be found on the SRA website.

4 OBLIGATIONS TO SUBJECTS

In response to growing concerns about the use and abuse of data, a concern for human rights and the minimising of personal and social harm, the need to generate innovative research methods for accessing diverse data sources, and the technical problems of preserving, sharing and analysing secondary data there have been significant attempts by governmental and non-governmental agencies to provide best practice guidelines. The UK Data Archive and the Royal Statistical Society offer one such guide (University of Essex and Royal Statistical Society, 2002) as do the Department of Work and Pensions (Bacon and Olsen, 2003). The considerable contribution from feminist researchers to reflexive and reflective practice in social research is comprehensively covered in Mauthner et al. (2002). They also offer some alternative (additional) ethical principles to those found in the SRA Guidelines which they claim to be more considerate of research subjects.

Avoiding undue intrusion: A distinction can be drawn

between unobtrusive methods (Lee 1995: 57-60) and unobtrusive measures (Webb at al.1966 and 2000; Lee, 2000). The former being clearly more intrusive than the latter – though that does not excuse the latter from consideration of the subjects' perception of intrusion. Boruch & Cecil (1979 & 1982) describe sampling and statistical techniques for preserving privacy. Hartley (1983) outlines the threats to privacy entailed by various sampling procedures. Michael (1984) is a journalistic account of the threats to privacy from all sources in Britain. Mirvis and Seashore (1982) is a general discussion of research in organisations, where questions about the appropriate extent of intrusion and intervention are particularly pressing. Reeves and Harper (1981) is a text on organisation research in a British industrial context.

Obtaining informed consent: Wax (1979 & 1982) argue for the inappropriateness of requiring informed consent in ethnographic enquiry, while Capron (1982) defends the requirement. Agar (1980: 183, 188) discusses succinctly some of the difficulties ethnographers face in complying with this requirement. O'Connor (1976) discusses problems of interpreting consent, or lack of it, in hierarchical field settings such as prisons. Bulmer (1982) presents an extended case against covert research and summarises this in Bulmer (2000). Singer (1978) reports empirical evidence about the differential effects of seeking informed consent from survey respondents.

Modifications to informed consent: Douglas (1979) argues against formal requirements to obtain consent. Bok (1979) summarises and discusses ethical decision making in the most noteworthy examples of early deceptive social science research. Geller (1982) makes suggestions about how to avoid having to deceive research subjects. Form (1973) deals at length with relations between scientists and gatekeepers.

Protecting the interests of subjects: Baumrind (1972) makes a plea for priority for the interests of research

subjects. Klockars (1979) discusses how to handle these interests when they seem to be anti social and/or illegal. Freidson (1978) argues in favour of the routine destruction of all identifiers for data about individuals. Okely (1984) discusses the hazards in publishing findings on an identifiable social group in Britain. Loo (1982) gives a case study of research aimed at promoting the welfare of a deprived community. Canada Council (1977) discusses the special problems that arise in research on captive populations and on children. Warwick (1983) examines the ethical issues that may arise when research is conducted in Third World countries.

Preventing disclosure of identities: Boruch & Cecil (1979 & 1982) provide technical answers. Hartley (1982) discusses the relation between sampling and concealment. Hicks (1977) says many pseudonyms used in social science reports are unnecessary. Gibbons (1975) says much the same. Grinyer (2001) points to the difficulty of resisting pressure from authorities to disclose subjects' identities. She also discusses issue arising from subjects wishing to disclose their identities (Grinyer 2002).

Enabling participation: Ways of enabling children to take part in research are discussed in Boyden and Ennew (1997). Dean (1996) contains several chapters dealing with the excluded and the vulnerable; Corden (1996) in particular examines the dilemmas involved in researching and writing about poverty. Gorard (2002, 2003) addresses the delicate counterbalancing of ethical principles by pointing out how fulfilling obligations to participants may lead to excluding the interests of the majority who are, of necessity, non-participants but who stand to gain from the valuable findings of good quality, rigorously conducted social research.

5 ETHICS COMMITTEES AND IRB's

A full discussion of the role of ethics committees or independent review boards with reference to several key illustrative cases can be found in Shea (2000). The principles and political legality of ethical review is clearly and comprehensively summarised in Foster (2001). Romm (2001) addresses the problem of "accountability" within a broad-ranging discussion of methodology that looks at the assumptions and outcomes of social research in terms of how it measures up to the "scientific method".

6 STANDARD PROTOCOLS FOR CHECKING ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is advisable for researchers to routinely check their projects to ensure they are meeting ethical requirements. Checklists both act as an aide memoire and are frequently required procedure prior to seeking approval from ethics committees. Such protocols are likely to be increasingly employed as standard datasets to ensure compliance with research governance requirements. Governance is facilitated by the standardising of database "fields" for containing information about any research project.

The following checklist is intended to act as a comprehensive stimulus to ethical considerations throughout a project. Such a checklist prompts the making of clear statements of intent, mechanisms of approach and consideration of hazard arising from research in a manner which can be understood by the public and research professionals alike. While some of the items appear to be beyond the scope of ethics alone, any matter that may affect the success of research is of indirect ethical interest if it may expose respondents to exploitation or risk.

1. PROJECT TITLE This offers a quick reference for any interested party and indicates the broad sphere of interest.
2. EXPECTED DURATION Gives some indication of commitment required of subjects and time given by researcher.
3. IDENTITY OF FIELD RESEARCHERS AND ORGANISATIONAL BASE A list of names, positions, qualifications and functions in the proposed research of all those holding responsible positions and who might be in direct contact with subjects. This offers an estimate of competence together with a chain of responsibility and accountability.
4. PURPOSE OF STUDY Aims and objectives might indicate hypothesis testing, policy evaluation, and any potential "value" added to the subject group and/or society in general.
5. SOURCES OF FUNDING The organisation, individual or group providing the finance for the study.
6. SCIENTIFIC BACKGROUND Some rationale for conducting the study should be offered. If this investigation has been done previously, why repeat it? What research methods are being employed? Why and how was the subject/respondent chosen? What broad sampling techniques have been deployed?
7. DESIGN OF THE STUDY Describe briefly what will be done and how the subjects are to be expected to participate. What will be required of them? All procedural matters should be clarified. Time commitments and data-collection settings should be revealed. Data analysis methods and procedures should also be clarified.

8. POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND HAZARDS What risks to the subject are entailed in involvement in the research? Are there any potential physical, psychological or dislosure dangers that can be anticipated? What is the possible benefit or harm to the subject or society from their participation or from the project as a whole? What procedures have been established for the care and protection of subjects (e.g. insurance, medical cover) and the control of any information gained from them or about them?

9. RECRUITMENT PROCEDURES Is there any sense in which subjects might be "obliged" to participate – as in the case of students, prisoners, or patients – or are volunteers being recruited? If participation is compulsory, the potential consequences of non-compliance must be indicated to subjects; if voluntary, entitlement to withdraw consent must be indicated and when that entitlement lapses.

10. INFORMED CONSENT Where appropriate, consent of participants MUST be requested and put in terms easily comprehensible to lay persons. This should ideally be both ORALLY and in WRITING. An information sheet setting out factors relevant to the interests of participants in the study must be written in like terms and handed to them in advance of seeking consent. They must be allowed to retain this sheet.

11. DATA PROTECTION The project should comply with the requirements of current data protection legislation and how this is accomplished should be disclosed to participating subjects and those monitoring the research procedure. This should include proposed data storage arrangements, degree of security etc. and whether material facts have been withheld (and when, or if, such facts will be disclosed).

12. CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY The steps taken to safeguard the confidentiality of records and any potential identifying information about the subject must be revealed.

13. MONITORING OF THE RESEARCH Organisational procedures for monitoring the project should be available for inspection.

14. DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS What is the anticipated use of the data, forms of publication and dissemination of findings etc?

7. CONTACTING EXPERIENCED SRA MEMBERS WHO CAN HELP WITH ETHICAL PROBLEMS

In the first instance contact Ron Iphofen (r.iphofen@bangor.ac.uk).

Ron chaired the SRA Ethical Guidelines Working Group 2001; represented the SRA on the European RESPECT project setting pan-European professional standards in socio-economic research (see: www.respectproject.org.uk); and is responsible for this 2003 update. He has particular interests in qualitative research in health. If Ron is unable to answer any question he should be able to put you in touch with other experienced SRA members who can.

8. OTHER USEFUL LINKS AND CONTACTS

The following urls have turned out to provide useful links to information from other groups, agencies and individuals on researcher conduct and research ethics:

Professional Associations:

British Sociological Association – http://www.britsoc.org.uk/about/ethic.htm

British Psychological Society – http://www.bps.org.uk/about/rules5.cfm

The MRS Code of Conduct and related guidelines (see http://www.mrs.org.uk) are now based on the European Code developed by ESOMAR (http://www.esomar.nl).

General linking sites:

The Association for Practical and Professional Ethics -http://ezinfo.ucs.indiana.edu/~appe/home.html

Links to other ethics sites – http://ezinfo.ucs.indiana.edu/~appe/links2.html

The Social Philosophy and Policy Center covers a range of ethical issues of concern to researchers at: http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/sppc/index.html

and while the following site is on ethics in public policy and administration it has useful links to elsewhere: http://plsc.uark.edu/book/books/ethics/index.htm

Cases and publications:

http://www.uark.edu/depts/plscinfo/pub/ethics/ethics.html

Information on the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics' published case studies can be found on: http://ezinfo.ucs.indiana.edu/~appe/cases.html

The US Department of Energy expresses its concerns for human subjects research on: http://www.er.doe.gov/production/ober/humsubj/index.html

Other authoritative sources:

Look at the general

information site for the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), http://ohrp.osophs.dhhs.gov/ which is a part of the US Department of Health and Human Services. It is well worth spending some time travelling around this site which is highly informative. There is a useful guide listed by "topics" on: http://ohrp.osophs.dhhs.gov/g-topics.htm

On the obligations of research agencies for confidentiality, quality etc. look at:

http://www.census.gov/main/www/policies.html

The US Centre for Disease Control has some useful advice on appropriate use of lay terms for writing explanatory leaflets and guidelines for writing consent forms: http://www.cdc.gov/od/ads/hsr2.htm

Discussion groups within which these issues have been discussed include: http://frank.mtsu.edu/~jpurcell/Ethics/ethics.html

And: METHODS@linux08.UNM.EDU A listserv discussion group on research methods to which you can subscribe by sending the message:

SUBSCRIBE METHODS <YOUR NAME>

Operational codes can be found on: http://ohrp.osophs.dhhs.gov/

Advisory protocols such as human subjects guidance decisions charts:

http://ohrp.osophs.dhhs.gov/humansubjects/guidance/decisioncharts.htm

Those seeking advice about ethics committee approval should look at:

The Intelligent Scholar's Guide to the Use of Human Subjects in Research http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~research/ISG.html

An IRB Discussion Forum (known as "MCWIRB") promotes the discussion of ethical, regulatory and policy concerns with human subjects research. There is an "IRB Links" to other web-based

resources concerning IRB's, human subjects research and the ethics of scientific research in general:
http://www.mcwirb.org/

visit the site at:
http://garnet.acns.fsu.edu/~slosh/Index.htm

From the UK Data Archive:

On preserving and sharing statistical data:

http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/home/PreservingSharing.pdf

Information about the UK Data Archive licence with depositors, plus a download option for the form can be found at:

http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/depositingData/LicenceAgreement.asp

Associated user forms can be viewed at:

http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/orderingData/linkAccessAgreement.asp

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Social Research Association

The Social Research Association was founded in the UK in 1978 to advance the conduct, development and application of social research.

Its aims are:

- to provide a forum for discussion and communication about social research activity in all areas of employment
- to encourage the development of social research methodology, standards of work and codes of practice
- to review and monitor the organisation and funding of social research
- to promote the development of training and career structures for social researchers
- to encourage the use of social research for formulating and monitoring social policy

Membership of the Association is open to any person interested or involved in social research. Application forms can be obtained from the administrator:
admin@the-sra.org.uk

or downloaded from the web site:
www.the-sra.org.uk

There is an active branch in Scotland and information can be obtained from:
scotland@the-sra.org.uk