Ethical Issues in Quantitative Research

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Overview

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- Ethical Issues Throughout the Project Lifecycle
  - Informed Consent
  - Collecting Sensitive Information
  - Confidentiality vs Disclosure of Harm
  - Mental Capacity Act and Inclusivity
- Conclusions
About NatCen Social Research
Social Research that works for society

We believe that social research has the power to make life better. By really understanding the complexity of people’s lives and what they think about the issues that affect them, we give the public a powerful and influential role in shaping decisions and services that can make a difference to everyone. And as an independent, not for profit organisation we’re able to put all our time and energy into delivering social research that works for society.
Organisation structure

Office Staff

Research

Operations

HR, IT etc

Training and Project Briefings

Field Staff

Interviewers & Nurses

Team Leaders / Supervisors /

Area Managers
A ‘typical’ interview
Ethical Approval

- NatCen REC
- MREC
- University RECs
Case Studies
Case Studies

- UK Study of Abuse and Neglect of Older People
- National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal)
- English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA)
Ethical Issues Throughout the Project Lifecycle
Informed Consent

How much information to give, and when?

Can too much information be off putting?

Who should be given the information?

Case Study: Natsal

- Britain’s first, and largest, study of sexual behaviour
- 1 person aged 16-74 selected from each household
- Detailed questions about sexual experiences, as well as more general questions eg general health
- Urine and saliva samples collected
Asking difficult questions

What if the participant gets upset about something in the interview?

Is it ok to ask people about their sex lives?
Questionnaire design

- Neutral language
- Interviewer training
- Showcards and self completion methods
  - Reduce embarrassment
  - Maintain privacy

Test your questions first
Ensuring no harm comes to the participant

- Cannot predict what will upset participants
- Signpost participants to organisations who can help
- What support is available to the interviewer?
Disclosure of harm

What if an interviewer sees or hears something that worries them?

Can they pass on information about a participant when they have promised confidentiality?
What if a female participant in her 80s tells the interviewer that she thinks her son is stealing from her?
…A man aged 45 reports that he is having sex with a girl under the age of 16?
...A man in his 90s reports that he is being bullied by his care worker?
…a 16 year old girl tells the interviewer that she is being sexually abused by a member of her family?
…there is a young child in the house, and the interviewer has a ‘funny feeling’ about the parents’ behaviour. The conditions in the house are unsanitary, the parents’ behaviour towards the child seems very passive, and the interviewer is worried about neglect?
Case Study: Elder abuse

- 1 person aged 66+ selected from each household
- Did not cover people living in institutions
- Measured prevalence of four types of abuse:
  - Psychological
  - Physical
  - Sexual
  - Financial
- Also measured neglect
NatCen’s obligations

There is no statutory requirement for NatCen fieldworkers to disclose information to public bodies when they perceive a risk…

…BUT statutory law requires citizens to disclose information that could aid the detection of specific crimes

…AND fieldworkers are entitled, as an independent free agent, to disclose information.
Risks

Participants make take civil action against interviewers if they believe an interviewer made a malicious false disclosure of information against them…

…Equally they can take civil action against an interviewer who perceived them to be in clear danger but failed to disclose

By requesting that the fieldworker informs NatCen of their concerns, NatCen take on responsibility for the decision
Interviewer has concerns

No action during interview

Contact nominated member of staff

Consider whether needs to go to disclosure board

Board convened immediately

No action
# How does the board decide?

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<th>Factor</th>
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<td>Seriousness of alleged harm or illegal behaviour</td>
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<td>Strength of evidence</td>
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<td>Ability of individual involved to help him or herself</td>
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<td>Is the situation already known to support services / others capable of intervening?</td>
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<td>Potential risks to individuals and to NatCen</td>
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<td>Approvals previously given by NatCen or other Research Ethics Committees</td>
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Mental Capacity Act and inclusivity

Participants must have the mental capacity to make an informed decision about whether to take part.

But it’s important for our research to fully represent the population, including vulnerable groups.
Case Study: ELSA

- Longitudinal Study of people aged 50+ and their partners
- Follow participants up every 2-4 years
- Interview + Nurse visit
- Long interview (1.5 hours)
- Range of topics covered including
  - Health
  - Finance
  - Psychosocial health
  - Biological / cognitive measures
Adaptations on ELSA

Interviews in institutions
Communication is key

Proxy Interviews
If respondent lacks mental capacity to make an informed decision, can do a proxy interview with partner / relative

Consider frailty
Find out best time of day
Break up interview into chunks
Skip sections
Conclusions
Conclusions

- In large-scale surveys, researchers will not have contact with participants
- Will be largely unaware of ethical issues that arise during fieldwork
- Preparation is vital
- Interviewers need training and clear guidelines
- Also need ongoing support
Thank you

If you want further information or would like to contact the author,

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