

Research Ethics and Information Credibility

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This Workshop

This is the online research skill workshop. This workshop provides an overview and information references that supply critical knowledge to help you succeed in this course.

This workshop covers issues and concerns in research ethics and how to judge and maintain the credibility of information.

Ethics

Ethics is a system of accepted beliefs that controls behavior.

The Lindloff text covers the specifics of ethical behavior in research. Also, please refer to Dutton's principles of research ethics on this wiki page.

In this workshop, I want to cover with practical ethical issues for you as student researchers and those whom you study.

Ethics

Codified social science research ethics emerged because of documented abuses.

It is critical that any research you conduct that involves people protects the emotional, financial, social, and physical safety of those involved.

Ethics

The primary axiom of research ethics is do no harm (or as little harm as possible).

The simple act of reporting what you see or quoting someone may cause harm, just as carelessly mentioning something one friend said in a conversation with another can cause hurt feelings.

Just because it may seem like “no big deal” to you, that does not mean it is not a big deal to someone else.

Example

In my own participant observation research, I got to know many people quite well. People have their own personalities and can be or do “jerky” or rude things.

When I went to write up these things it took many hours and a lot of stress to try and be truthful but not make people, people I see again, seem like jerks. What if they were responsible for something that had a negative impact but was not widely known?

What do you owe these people? What responsibility do you have to the official record? Which should be your priority?

Example

The hell of ethical behavior is to balance competing and often conflicting interests.

Research takes a lot of time and effort and this can lead a researcher to rationalize publishing information that perhaps he/she should not.

I pulled a paper from publication before it was published because I thought (Post 9-11) that it would endanger the people in my study. This was a costly and difficult decision.

Student Case Study Example

A team in a class wanted to research online dating, so they had a student create a fake profile and communicated with actual men looking for companionship. She represented herself as available and interested. However, she was involved in a relationship and was not interested in dating the men she communicated with.

Was this ethical?

Student Case Study Example

There are several ethical issues at work here.

The first is deception. The act of deceiving people should not be taken lightly. Can this study be done another way?

Next is harm. Dating is an emotionally charged activity. Perhaps a person gets his hopes up only to be rejected when the project is over. This could be “the last straw” that leads him give-up or do something drastic. Or perhaps he decided to forgo another potential mate to pursue the fake.

There is also the reputation of the dating service you are using. It relies on honesty and the reasonable expectation that people use the service for its intended reason.

The repercussions and potential harm of a study can be hard predict.

Informed Consent

Informed consent is when those involved in the study have the study itself explained to them as well as any potential pitfalls of participation. People may “opt-out” at any time.

The problem with informed consent is that people may change their behavior if they know they are being observed.

What to do? How do you get the “real deal?”

Public vs. Private

One rule of thumb is to think about the expectation of privacy.

Obviously a home, organization, or password protected webspace is private.

If you are observing people in a public place, they have little or no expectation of privacy.

The problem is defining what is a “public” space. Is a classroom at SJSU a public space? If it is online and you can get to it via Google, is that public?

Put yourself in that persons position, what would be YOUR expectations of privacy?

Ethics

So, what can you do?

Just like ethics in everyday life, this is something you need to figure out as you go.

The main purpose of this workshop is to get you to start thinking about the impacts of the research you conduct.

Liars!

People have their own agendas and may not be above using a researcher for their own ends. People also try, both intentionally and sub-consciously, to represent themselves as they wish to be seen.

For example, some people lie on their self-report logs for TV viewing. They say they are watching Masterpiece Theatre, but electronic monitoring shows they are really watching “Dukes of Hazard” re-runs!

People will also try and please a researcher by telling him/her what they think the researcher wants to hear.

Finally, and especially when you are looking at a social group or organization, people have explicit and implicit agendas and can use the research process to try and further their own ends. This is not to say that people lie or intentionally deceive researchers (although this is sometime the case) on a regular basis, but you need to understand that while perception is reality to individuals, perception does not always reflect broader reality. This is why it is critical that a researcher collects a wide range of data of different types from different sources and through doing so is able to get a grasp of the some sort of consensus of what is going on in a scene.

This leads us to part 2 - judging the quality of information.

Judging Information Credibility

Just as you need to access multiple sources in your data collection and realize that people are naturally biased and have their own agendas, it is important to understand that organizations and institutions that provide us with information also have biases and agendas that “color” the information they produce.

In this section, we look at some things to consider when gathering secondary information.

Bias and Subjective Reality

“Reality is what you can get away with.”

-Robert Anton Wilson

There is always a lot of talk in the media about who is “bias” and who “un-bias,” but really **there is no such thing as the absence of bias**. Bias is always present - it is a matter of degree.

We cannot escape who we are; our cultures and co-cultures, education, experiences, family, race, gender, and so forth. We are the sum total of our experiences and it is extremely difficult if not impossible for this not to impact the way we see and evaluate the world.

Systems of knowledge and information are designed to blunt this effect, but can never fully eliminate it.

True Dat

Empirical (causal) truth is possible in the natural sciences, but more challenging in complex systems involving human interaction.

This is because the more variables (moving parts) a system has, the harder it is to know what is influencing what.

Still, at the end of the day, we live a physical world and have to make decisions.

All we can reasonably do is to analyze the information we have the best we can and realize that this analysis is provisional (subject to change based on new data).

Advantages/Disadvantages of Information Sources

All information sources such as the media, government, or academe are products of complex social, economic, political, and cultural forces. These forces impact how those who work in or manage these systems view what is credible or even worthwhile.

This is further complicated by the fact that these effects work, often in different ways, at the individual, professional, organizational, institutional, and system levels.

Case Study: US Press

The idea of objectivity in the press is a direct result of technological, social, and economic changes.

The invention of the telegraph fostered the creation of news services that could deliver stories nationally, which resulted in the need for more generic or neutral accounts of news that could play anywhere. Previously, news had been a very local affair which regional flavor, viewpoints, and bias.

Newspapers used to be operated by political groups, but when they made the shift to advertiser support they needed to reach a broader audience, which meant dulling their partisan edge. They became businesses and their main focus shifted to making money, not pushing an explicit political agenda.

News media depends on access to people in power and rough treatment by journalists often results in denial of access. Moreover, the news media is a multi-billion dollar business so it is effectively part of the establishment and is invested in the status quo.

Journalists in the US are mostly educated in large public universities, taught by former journalists who received advanced degrees from a handful of journalism Ph.D. programs. Journalists are largely white and male and unlike 70%+ of the general population hold college degrees. Moreover, this profession has been shrinking with fewer jobs. This training and these factors result in a particular worldview, a narrow concept of what constitutes "newsworthiness," and a tendency to be hesitant in challenging authority.

All these factors influence what we see/read in the press (and what we do not).

Advantages/Disadvantages of Information Sources

Navigating information sources is a matter of taking into account the regimes of control in place in each system to ensure quality.

Often credibility is higher for systems with systematic internal/external controls. These include:

Professional/member codes that dictate behavior and reinforce norms of behavior.

Certification/licensing that ensures standards and has penalties for violations.

Independent oversight by groups or organizations without vested interest.

Legal/regulatory restrictions that set standards and have policing powers

Transparency (process) that demonstrates how information is gathered and evaluated.

Red Flags

Any of these MAY indicate poor information quality.

Significant omissions (esp. contradictory info)

Factual errors (major or minor)

Misrepresentation of others material/ research

Failure to identify sources, affiliations, funding, self.

Value laden language/extreme hyperbole

Decontextualized (no dates/lack of info)

Faulty Logic (guilt by association, unsupported causality, drawing-the-line fallacy...)

Advantages/Disadvantages of some Sources

Academic: well vetted, but often dated and constrained by discipline and tradition.

Mass Media: immediate/analysis, but constrained by space/time (page space, 30 minute newscast), advertising, “newsworthiness.”

Government: good data source, but analysis is constrained by politics (what gets studied and how)

Industry Press: inside, specialized, and timely information, but constrained by narrow focus and interests.

“Alternative” Press: unconstrained by convention, constrained by often narrow oppositional focus.

Blogs: insider expertise, but may have hidden bias - quality must be taken within context of its sphere (judged by peers).

Crowd Source: (Wikipedia) at best a good consensus of the facts and issues - at worse simplistic analysis of complex problems, may lack required expertise.

Hierarchy of Media: Higher quality information can often be found in publications geared toward political and business elites - decision-makers who need the best analysis. Some of these publication are [The Economist](#), [Foreign Policy](#), or the Business section of your local paper (where they hide the real news).

Social Scientific Process

The scientific method was designed to be evidence based, add rigor through common systems and organization, to help reduce bias and achieve better and replicable results.

Clear research questions

Transparent and detailed research design

Full disclosure and rationale for all research choices, processes, and personal relationships

Analysis supported by evidence

Contextualized in current research and the studies venue

Reflection on the limitations of the research process

Workshop Tasks

To earn credit you need to post a substantive 100+ word comment on this workshop's wiki page and complete the following tasks.

You belong to a local car club. It has a Facebook page and a Google Group listserv. Anyone can request to join. You want examine how people represent themselves in this venue.

1. What are 3 potential ethical issues of this research?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of getting informed consent in this situation?
3. Is there potential harm in such a study? If so what? If not, why not?
4. Address these ethical issues in the comments section on this workshop's wiki page.