Podcast 2. Ethical considerations when choosing your design approach: The value of thinking of external/ecological ethics

This is the second of four podcasts to aid your thinking about ethics and your research project.

When you design a study which plans to collect data from human participants there are several layers of responsibilities which you should consider. These range from international, through national to local.

Firstly, there is your responsibility to the academy of researchers in your field internationally. Researchers undertaking research which later becomes exposed as unethical and detrimental to participants has a damaging effect on the field more generally. The research carried out in concentration camps by Mengele and other members of the Nazi movement in the name of medical science has had lasting effects on the attention now paid to ethical clearance of studies which involve humans.

Secondly, and in response to negative experiences of when research had been carried out in unregulated and unethical ways, research organisations, such as national research councils, and professional associations, such as in education, sociology, psychology etc. developed overarching codes of ethical guidance. Researchers who are funded by these councils or those who are members of such associations must comply with such guidance, with some professional associations prepared to expel members. Underpinning all of these codes of ethical practice are the principles of showing respect to participants. They articulate agreed acceptable norms of ethical practice.

In the case of Social Science departments in UK Universities our internal research ethics guidance is compliant with the ethical framework for research ethics of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2010). Depending on your field and research topic you might also be expected to be guided by the relevant professional ethical codes of practice, even if you are not a member, of for example the Academy of Management (AoM, 2006), British Educational Research Council (BERA, 2011), British Society of Criminology (BSC, 2006), British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002/2004) and the Political Studies Association (PSA, 2013).

Additional national expectations of us as researchers are our legal responsibilities. In the UK these include meeting the expectations of the Data Protection Act (1998), being prepared for requests under the Freedom of Information Act (2000) and responsibilities should participants disclose criminal behaviour to us. If you are carrying out your study overseas, this adds a further dimension in considering national expectations of research study. We recommend that you find out what is expected of you as a social science researcher in the country of your
research site in terms of a) guidance and b) processes for gaining permission for your data collection.

In any case you will need to gain ethical approval from the University research ethics committees. There is information about how to go about this elsewhere on Blackboard, as well as in the final podcast of this set of four.

You should also think locally as to how well your study plans and approach will fit in with the cultural and organisational norms of your research site. By negotiating your access to the research site you may need to identify gatekeepers to broker how best to contact participants (If you are particularly interested in using gatekeepers please refer to the reference details for published work by Blodgett et al, 2005; Homan, 2002 and Sixsmith et al, 2003). Thinking about local considerations will help you show respect to those in your research site as you can find out what is acceptable or unreasonable in terms of data collection requests. You may well need to develop an awareness of how parts of the organisation relate to one another such that you gain some insights into the micropolitics of how your participants relate to the organisation’s leadership for example. This will be important to making sure that you are aware of how your requests fit in with usual expectations of participants and also about issues concerning dissemination of your findings. The more you know about your research site, the more accurately you can estimate any risks to anyone as a result of your research plans. Furthermore, this knowledge should help you adapt your language when gaining informed consent to be sensitive to usual ways of working. All of this information gathering and sensitivity should increase your chances of getting participants to agree to your requests.

As a result of these richer appreciations you may find yourself adjusting and adapting your research design, which you can explain when reporting your study. For example if your initial plan was to introduce an intervention and study its effects you might find that this would be a major request of an organisation if you find that early conversations reveal unease and raise concerns. You could involve the potential participants more fully in your research plans and develop a more collaborative research design. If you are still interested in using an intervention, this might mean that you choose an action research or design-based research design frame. Alternatively, you might move to studying the phenomenon of interest as it is now or perceptions of that phenomenon using case study, biographical or ethnographic frames.

External ethics was the term used by David Seedhouse (Seedhouse, 1998; 1998b) for the considerations covered in this podcast. He advised researchers to look outward from their research sample and site to ensure that the study was compliant with external expectations of the researcher. David Flinders’ (Flinders, 1992) termed these considerations as ecological,
which reminds us to think of our responsibilities as inter-connected. Kris Stutchbury and Alison Fox (Stutchbury and Fox, 2009) merged these two into one dimension in their ethical appraisal framework, as explained in this podcast.

References to the authors’ work cited and references to professional associations’ ethical guidance are found at the end of the script of this podcast.

References:


Economic and Social Research Council (2010) Framework for research ethics. Available at: http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/framework-for-research-ethics-09-12_tcm8-4586.pdf


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Political Studies Association (2013) Guidelines for good professional conduct. Available at: http://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/GUIDELINES%20FOR%20GOOD%20PROFESSIONAL%20CONDUCT.pdf


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