Wiles, Rose. "Risk and safety." *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 55–68. The 'What is?' Research Methods Series. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849666558.ch-005>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 09:38 UTC.

Copyright © Rose Wiles 2013. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Harper, 1998; Pink, 2007). This involves showing images to participants, and allowing them to comment on them, prior to publication or presentation, as well as consideration by researchers of the political, social and cultural contexts in which images will be viewed and interpreted. There may however be a tension between study participants' wishes about how images of them are used and researchers' responsibility to protect them from harm. Collaboration with research participants on issues around anonymity and dissemination involve more than simply meeting participants' wishes; researchers need to consider carefully and explain the various implications to individuals and in some cases it may be necessary to override their wishes if this is viewed as being in study participants' best interests.

The longevity of visual and other data which can remain in the public domain through publication in books and articles for many years, if not indefinitely, also raises some issues that warrant consideration with research participants. While an individual may be happy for a specific image or expressed view to be made public at one point in their lives they may be less so in the future as their circumstances change, yet once something enters the public domain it may be difficult or impossible to remove it. The internet offers considerable opportunities for global dissemination but, without restricted access to sites, raises the possibilities that data can be copied and reproduced in contexts other than those for which they were obtained. This also raises specific issues in relation to the storage and archiving of research data. There is a need to ensure that all data are stored in ways that ensure confidentiality and that express consent is provided for their continued and subsequent use.

Summary

Confidentiality and anonymity are distinct but related concepts; confidentiality refers to the need to keep identifiable information about individuals private and anonymity is one of the ways in which data are kept confidential. Intentional disclosure of information may be necessary in certain circumstances if research participants are viewed as being at risk. Accidental disclosures of information also occur but care should be taken to avoid these where possible. There is an increasing trend in research towards research participants being identified rather than anonymised.

5 Risk and safety

Introduction

Ensuring the safety and well-being of research participants is an important element of ethical research practice. While much qualitative research may pose only minimal risks to participants it is important not to disregard the risks that can occur, particularly in research on topics which are in some way 'sensitive' because they focus on personal issues, taboo issues or issues which pose a threat for those participating in it (see Lee, 1993). Such research also poses significant risks for researchers which should not be overlooked. Consideration should also be given to wider risks to researchers' institutions, their disciplines and the field of study.

Risks for research participants

All activities pose some level of risk and research participation is no exception. It is generally accepted that participation in research should pose no more than minimal risk to participants, that researchers should assess the potential risks and that participants should be fully informed of these as well as the benefits of taking part in research. In response to the increased ethical regulation of social research, various authors have noted that the risks of harm arising from social research are minimal at most, if not non-existent (see, for example, Atkinson, 2009; Dingwall, 2008). Certainly, in comparison with medical research the risks from social research are slight. However, this does not mean that risk of harm does not exist and authors such as Kent *et al* (2002) and van Teijlingen (2006) have disputed the assumption that social research is risk-free.

Assessing risk of harm

Assessing risks that might arise as a result of taking part in a research project involves researchers reflecting on the nature of risk and harm

and the ways in which their research might present risks to participants' well-being. Assessments of risk involve considerations of the potential for harm, both physical and psychological or emotional, as well as practical issues such as the costs participants might incur as a result of participating in research in terms of money, time and inconvenience. The range of risks that need consideration is discussed below.

The potential benefits of research also need to be considered, both to the research participants themselves and to the community or society more widely, so that research participants and researchers can assess whether the potential risks outweigh the benefits. Balancing possible risks of harm and the potential for benefit is far from straightforward. Risks of harm are generally (but not always) experienced by an individual but benefits are often to groups, communities or society more generally. It is also the case that benefits arising from research, such as a change in policy or provision for a specific group, are often long term and, if they occur at all, may do so some time after the research project has been completed. The Research Ethics Guidebook (<http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/>) makes the important point that benefits need to be thought of, and articulated to participants as, 'hoped for' outcomes of research rather than those that are guaranteed, noting that this terminology is 'more honest about the uncertainty underlying all research'. Researchers may, for example, hope that their research brings about a change in the way groups are perceived, or the treatment or provision they receive, but these hoped-for benefits may not occur as a result of one specific research project; indeed it may have no impact on the individual participant's experiences. It is certainly important not to raise participants' expectations about what the outcomes of the research may be.

Individuals may experience personal benefits as a result of taking part in research, such as feeling listened to, having an opportunity to express their views or feeling that their views will influence policy or practice. Some researchers have reported that their participants have gained considerable benefits as a result of being able to talk about issues or experiences with an independent person that they haven't been able to discuss with anyone else. However, it cannot be assumed that such benefits will occur. It is not the purpose of research to bring about such benefits; if they occur they are perhaps best seen as a side effect of research participation.

Clearly, if risks to participants are greater than minimal and the benefits not evident then there is little justification for the research

being conducted. However, who should make that decision? Arguably, participants are best placed to make decisions about the risks they are willing to take in relation to participating in research. Researchers, or indeed research ethics committees, who decide on participants' behalf that a project or method is too risky for participants have been accused of paternalism (Hope, 2004, Pels, 2008). Nevertheless, researchers often experience a conflict between seeking to protect study participants on the one hand but allowing them the agency to make decisions about the risks they are willing to take on the other (Wiles *et al*, 2011).

Assessments of risk, harm and benefit are far from straightforward. It is not possible to identify all risks that an individual might encounter from participating in research. A researcher cannot know what an individual might find distressing and even fairly innocuous research topics can result in a research participant becoming distressed. In a study on private health care that I undertook many years ago, one of the first interviews I undertook focused on a man's hospital stay for a minor routine operation and resulted in him crying as he recalled his wife's serious illness twenty years previously. I could not have predicted this response and neither could the interviewee when he agreed to participate. Similarly, Jaimie Ellis, a PhD student, found that what she thought was an activity that was likely to pose little risk to the autistic teenagers taking part in her research resulted in considerable distress for one young person. In her research, the participants were asked to write an essay about their imagined future:

The class started with a discussion each taking it in turns to talk about what they might do as adults. Mrs Morrison [the teacher] asked the class where they might be living when they are older. Vishal responded with a definite "16. House of my own". The same question was asked of Ben ... Ben burst into a flood of tears. "No, no I don't want to live on my own, I'm just a teenager". We were all a little surprised by the tears. "Will you leave home when you're older Ben?" asked Mrs Morrison. Ben [said] "No, no I want to stay at school, I'm just a teenager". He seemed to have forgotten or misunderstood that the task was about the future and not the present. He threw his head into his hands in a panic ... and flopped down on the table sobbing into his arm. (Ellis, 2011, field notes)

Both of these examples illustrate the importance of emergent ethics, of thinking about, and managing, ethical issues and risk throughout the

lifetime of a research project. The important point to note is that while it is important that researchers think carefully about potential risks and benefits of participating in research and inform participants so that they can decide whether or not they want to take part, neither researchers nor participants necessarily know what issues might emerge in the process of the research and how they will be responded to by participants.

Types of risk

A range of potential risks of taking part in qualitative research have been identified. Most risks of social research relate to participants' psychological or emotional well-being. Risks to participants' physical well-being are less likely but not unheard of (see Lee, 1993). Risks to well-being have been identified as arising from: an emotional response during data collection; an emotional response to ending involvement with a project; and the effect of the publication of research findings.

Perhaps the most common type of risk arises from a participant's response to a question asked or topic discussed during fieldwork. People becoming upset or distressed is probably a relatively common experience in qualitative research, particularly in research on so called 'sensitive' topics (Lee, 1993). However, research can also engender other emotional responses in response to researchers' questions or activities. Embarrassment, humiliation or anxiety can occur in response to insensitive questions, questions or tasks that the research participant feels unable to answer or do, or topics or tasks that explore participants' underlying fears (see, for example, Grinyer, 2001). Research participants can feel deceived if they were not, or feel that they were not, told the 'real' reasons for undertaking the research. They may also feel devalued if they feel their views are disregarded or not taken seriously.

It has been observed that research participants can feel used by researchers and that they may feel disregarded or devalued as a result of participating in research. Researchers sometimes do engage in various activities to 'manipulate' participants to participate in research and to provide rich data, a process referred to by Bengry-Howell and Griffin (2011) as 'methodological grooming'. Such activities may leave participants feeling used after the research is completed and the researcher has exited from their lives, particularly if their expectations of benefits are not met. This is particularly the case with longitudinal research when participants

build up relationships with researchers over prolonged periods. As Iphofen (2009: 53) notes:

In longer term encounters ... the subject may need some 'closure' time and some opportunity to come to terms with a relationship that appeared to have friendship at its core but was, in effect, highly instrumental.

Considerable risks to participants can arise from the publication and dissemination of research; many of these issues have been discussed in chapter 4 on anonymity and confidentiality. Despite anonymisation, people may be upset at how they are portrayed in research reports. Crow and Wiles' (2008) review of community studies identified cases where some local residents were deeply unhappy about how they had been portrayed in publications. Such studies may also bring unwanted publicity, and media attention, to a research site given that the anonymisation of specific communities is notoriously difficult. The risk of unwanted media attention is not a risk only in community studies; it may also occur in research on specific groups or institutions or indeed in relation to categories of individuals. Research may result in negative publicity, and the reinforcement of stereotypes, about specific groups such as benefit claimants, young people, homeless people or ethnic minorities. The increasing pressure on researchers to provide evidence of the impact of their research and to get their research findings into the public domain may fuel these sorts of problems given the difficulties that researchers face in controlling how the media report their research findings.

Publication may also pose other risks where an individual's identity is disclosed, such as censure from others which might in some cases result in loss of friendship or employment. In research on political activity or illegal activity more extreme risks, including risk of physical harm or legal sanctions, might be present (see Lee, 1993).

Other risks concern the costs incurred, both financial and personal, from participating in research. These issues are often overlooked but warrant consideration. Such costs might be a loss of earnings incurred by taking time out to participate in research. Participants might also experience inconvenience; the time spent in participating in a project means they have less time to do other things they might want or need to do. Some of these factors can be offset, to some degree, by offering payments to participants in recognition of their contribution.

Minimising risks of harm

A number of ways have been identified to minimise and manage risks of harm from participating in research. Careful thought needs to be given prior to a study commencing of the possible risks of harm that the research might pose to individuals and/or the communities of which they are part. Research participants should have the risks and benefits of research participation explained to them as part of the consent process and make their own decisions about whether or not they want to participate. As discussed above, risks or harm should also be assessed throughout a research project as they emerge; the publication and dissemination of research are particular points when considerations of risks of harm need to be addressed. Research participants should also be informed, as part of the consent process, about who they can contact should they have a complaint about any aspect of their involvement in a study. Such complaints need to be reviewed and the research changed to take into account complaints as appropriate.

Strategies also need to be in place to manage any distress or discomfort that participants may experience during fieldwork. Research on a wide range of topics can generate emotional responses and researchers need to be sensitive to research participants' feelings. This may mean monitoring participants' body language for signs of fatigue or distress and responding to such signs by suggesting that data collection be suspended or stopped. It may also mean enabling people to decline to answer particular questions or discuss specific issues. For some groups, such as children or people in institutional settings, active encouragement for them to refuse to discuss particular issues may be necessary. In our research project on informed consent, researchers working with children reported providing participants with red cards that they could hold up if they didn't want to answer a particular question or didn't want to continue with the interview. They also noted the importance of researchers spending time with participants prior to the research commencing to enable them to 'rehearse' this so that they felt confident enough to do it. Another strategy identified was training participants to say 'pass' if they did not want to discuss specific topics (Wiles *et al*, 2005).

Involvement in research should mean that participants leave the research process feeling no more unhappy or distressed than they did when they began it. Of course it is not always in a researcher's power

to ensure this is the case but debriefing after an interview or other data collection activity is an important means of researchers assessing participants' response to the research. It is often appropriate to provide information or resources about support that people can access if the research has, or might, raise issues that an individual finds distressing. Such support might, for example, be contact numbers for the Citizens Advice Bureau, a counselling service or support groups relevant to the topic of the research.

Risks to researchers

Managing risks to researchers throughout a research project is an important, and often neglected, consideration. Bloor *et al*'s (2007) inquiry into the risk to well-being of researchers in qualitative research provides an extremely useful exploration of the issues. They note that:

While research-related harm thankfully remains comparatively rare, the evidence ... suggests that it is a more common phenomenon than the absence of formal complaints would suggest. (Bloor *et al*, 2007: 5)

There are two types of potential risks to researchers, physical risks and emotional risks, with the latter seeming to be the more common.

Physical risks

'Physical' risks comprise actual physical harm or threat of physical harm. Bloor *et al* (2007) note that cases of serious injury and death are rare in social research and that fear of harm is greater than actual cases of injury. Nevertheless, some deaths of researchers have been reported (Bloor *et al*, 2007: 18) and, as Kenyon and Hawker (1999) note, 'once would be enough', in other words, the fact that it is rare is little consolation if you are the rare case who experiences physical harm. While it is important not to overstate the risks, it is crucial that researchers carefully assess what potential risks might arise and make attempts to minimise them. Risks of physical harm arise from three aspects of a research project: the location, the topic and the participants, all of which may be interlinked.

In terms of location, risk of physical harm can occur when conducting research in some locations or settings. Considerations of physical harm generally focus on risks from others 'in the field'. However, the risk of illness and disease, particularly when working in developing countries, should not

be overlooked. Lee's (1995) distinction between 'ambient' and 'situational' danger is a useful one when considering physical risks to researchers; ambient danger refers to research conducted in dangerous environments or locations and situational danger refers to risks arising from the presence of a researcher in a setting which may provoke aggression or hostility from members of the group being researched (Lee, 1993: 10; Lee, 1995: 3). In many cases both ambient and situational dangers may be present. Ambient danger is present in volatile research environments or settings, such as research conducted in war zones or areas in which there is political or social unrest. Risks may arise simply by being in a dangerous environment and the everyday risks of such an environment (such as being injured by gunfire or in an anti-Government demonstration). Dangers may also exist when conducting research in unfamiliar settings and cultures which do not, on the face of it, present obvious dangers, particularly when researchers are working overseas. Such dangers may arise from not understanding safe ways of conducting oneself in a different culture, such as the areas in which it is safe for a woman to walk alone at night. They may also arise from reacting to cultural practices which a researcher deems as disturbing. Iphofen (2009: 86) notes that researchers can expose themselves to physical danger if they record or try to intervene in particular occurrences, such as the mistreatment of individuals. These risks are not confined to research being conducted in countries with which the researcher is not familiar. Similar risks also occur in researching various subcultures in a researcher's 'home' country. It has been noted that it is anthropological fieldwork (and perhaps also ethnography) that poses the greatest dangers to researchers in terms of physical harm (Iphofen, 2009: 86).

The risks associated with particular topics are closely linked with the location of research. Research focusing on activities defined as illegal or deviant in some way, such as drug use, football hooliganism and a range of criminal activities, may raise a number of risks of physical harm to researchers. Risk of harm may come from members of the group being studied who take a dislike to the focus of the research or the questions asked by the researcher or it may come from people who are external to the group who pose a threat to the group as a whole, which may include the researcher. Risk of physical harm is greater in covert research with such groups and may result if the researcher's true identity is disclosed. Physical harm is also a risk if participant observer roles are adopted to such an extent that the researcher 'goes native' and takes on the identity of the

group being studied. In such cases the researcher may find themselves embroiled in activities that place them in physical danger. Other types of topics that may engender risk of physical harm for researchers who adopt some form of participative ethnographic approach are those that focus on 'dangerous' recreational activities, such as speedway or rally driving, or types of employment, such as roofers or security 'bouncers' (see Bloor *et al*, 2007: 19). Here the physical risk is not necessarily from research participants but from the activity itself. Griffin and Bengry-Howell (2008), for example, in an ethnographic study of young working-class men who modify their cars, reflect on the decision taken by Bengry-Howell to have a ride in the car of one of the study participants:

[He] willingly put his life at risk in pursuance of research goals, by getting into a car that belonged to a person he vaguely knew who had admitted during interview that he had a penchant for driving at high speeds. On the other hand, the opportunity to actually sit alongside Jonno in his car, whilst he demonstrated what his car could do, had enabled [him] ... to directly experience the way in which the cultural practice of driving at high speeds operated within the context of the car modifier's world. (Griffin and Bengry-Howell, 2008: 28)

Individuals can pose risks to researchers in the contexts and ways outlined above but there are potentially additional risks that an individual may pose to a researcher's physical well-being unrelated to the geographical location or topic of the research. The context of much qualitative research involves researchers collecting data with individuals in private places, often study participants' homes. This often involves interviewing individuals that are unknown to them. The risk of the lone researcher coming into contact with someone who poses a physical threat to them is unlikely but nevertheless possible and it appears to be something about which researchers experience great unease (Kenyon and Hawker, 1999). It is certainly the case that being alone in a stranger's home does place researchers in a potentially vulnerable situation. Participants in Kenyon and Hawker's (1999) study report cases of serious harm and considerable anxiety about the potential for such harm. This issue is one which organisations have taken seriously as part of risk assessment procedures. There are several strategies which researchers can, and should, adopt to maximise their safety.

Organisations that employ researchers, and support research students, have a responsibility to protect them from harm. However, while there are generally formal structures in place, such as risk assessment procedures, insurance and lone working policies, these do not appear to be universally used by those who manage research and, in some cases, may offer inadequate safeguards even where they are used (Bloor *et al*, 2007: 4). Various recommendations, guidelines and protocols aimed at maintaining researchers' physical safety have been made (Bloor *et al*, 2007; Kenyon and Hawker, 1999; McCosker *et al*, 2001; Social Research Association, 2001). These include making careful assessments of risk in relation to the physical location of the fieldwork site, such as whether there are local tensions, political unrest or general safety issues for an individual in being located in and moving around the area. Assessments of risk in relation to data collection are also necessary and care is advised particularly in relation to individual interviews conducted in private places. Protocols for managing safety in such contexts, including leaving details of the interview location with a colleague with a plan for action if the researcher does not return at the expected time, are important. In some contexts it may be that it is more appropriate to use pairs of researchers to conduct interviews or to arrange interviews in public places. The Social Research Association's Code of Practice on Safety (2001) provides comprehensive advice on a range of issues relating to researcher safety (see also Iphofen, 2009: 88).

Emotional risks

The greater risk to researchers in undertaking qualitative research has been identified to be to their emotional well-being. This can include emotional trauma and, more commonly, emotional distress. Qualitative research generally necessitates researchers empathising with their participants in the process of collecting data. In much research, particularly research on 'sensitive' topics such as sexual abuse, suicide, terminal illness, bereavement and family breakdown, this involves researchers listening to people's experiences of hardship, grief, loss or fear. Such research can leave researchers feeling emotionally distressed and there is considerable evidence that this is widespread among qualitative researchers (Bloor *et al*, 2007: 44). Bloor *et al* (2007) describe research on emotionally demanding topics as a form of what Hochschild (1983) has termed 'emotional labour' in that researchers have to manage their emotions in the process of hearing about or observing the emotions, feelings and experiences of their

research participants in the interest of obtaining 'good data' and managing the research process. Watts (2008) describes the feelings generated in her ethnographic study of a cancer drop-in centre:

The emotion that has dominated participants' narratives in this study is fear ... the seeking of reassurance is emotionally distressing because whatever response I give, it will not be the one they covet, which is the promise of cure and the certainty of a longer life. Whilst they continue to hope I am sometimes laid low in my spirit. (Watts, 2008: 7)

Of course some researchers view it as important to engage emotionally with their research participants and to 'give something back' to them not only by revealing information about themselves and their experiences but by developing longer-term relationships with them (Oakley, 1981). However, this does not necessarily protect them from experiencing emotional distress and indeed may result in increased levels of distress as well as raising ethical dilemmas inherent in maintaining what may in effect be unequal relationships. In the face of emotional distress, a desire to help research participants is often provoked by observing or hearing about distressing events or experiences in the process of fieldwork. Brannen (1988) notes that such a response may have more to do with helping the researcher come to terms with the emotions evoked by the interview rather than helping the respondent (see Lee, 1993: 106). Adopting a position of 'proxy counsellor' or 'emotional helper' to research participants is certainly replete with problems; researchers do not necessarily have the skills to manage their respondents' emotional responses and it is, arguably, unethical to adopt such a role (Bloor *et al*, 2007: 26; Watts, 2008).

Emotional trauma can result from distressing memories on the part of the researcher being generated by the research. Emotional difficulties can also result from the process of observing practices or hearing about experiences or views to which a researcher is morally opposed but to which they are obliged to 'go along with' in order to avoid jeopardising the research. Other emotional difficulties that researchers have reported while in the field are feelings of isolation and lack of support. This is a particular issue for PhD students who, despite supervision, tend to work alone while in the field. It is also an issue for researchers working overseas in unfamiliar surroundings, a particular issue for many anthropologists.

A number of strategies have been identified to manage risks of emotional distress arising from the research process. Good preparation prior to entering the field is obviously important, and often overlooked (see Johnson and Macleod Clark, 2003). Placing limits on the amount of time spent in the field and/or interspersing data collection with time spent with other members of the research team or with research supervisors is one important management strategy. Counselling from a professional counsellor independent of the research team has been identified as potentially useful if specific problems occur, although this does not appear to be a widely-used strategy (see Corden *et al*, 2005). Most useful, and commonly used, appears to be a range of self-care strategies including opportunities for debriefing in research teams or with peers and using such groups as a source of support (Corden *et al*, 2005; Watts, 2008). Where procedures for debriefing are not set up as part of a research project, researchers may turn to informal support networks to 'offload' but this can raise issues of data confidentiality if clear understandings of confidentiality are not established as part of the process (Wiles, Crow *et al*, 2008). The use of a reflective diary or journal has been identified as another strategy for managing emotional distress (Bloor *et al*, 2007: 35).

Other risks

Other risks that researchers might encounter are reputational risks, to themselves as individuals, to their discipline and/or to their institution. Research governance procedures are likely to be in place in most institutions where researchers work to assess these risks prior to a study commencing, although problems may of course arise throughout a research project. Particular issues may arise in the process of publication of a study, particularly through engagement with the media. A degree of conflation, distortion and misinformation can occur which can have negative consequences for researchers and their institutions as well as their research participants. A website on research ethics produced by Lancaster University in the UK provides useful information on working with journalists (<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/researchethics/8-1-mediapub.html#pressoffices>). Reputational risk is also a factor in data archiving in that researchers form part of the data archived and feature in transcripts, field notes and detailed information about study design, data collection and analysis. The availability and scrutiny of these data by researchers for the purposes of secondary analysis may have particular reputational

implications for early career researchers (see Neale and Bishop, 2012b). This issue is explored further in chapter 7.

Summary

Despite some researchers' claims that social research is relatively risk-free, there is evidence that it poses a range of potential risks for both research participants and researchers. The greatest risk in social research is to researchers' and their participants' emotional and psychological well-being. Consideration also needs to be given to the risks of lone working for researchers.

This page intentionally left blank