

Ethics is Essential

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Introduction

As soon as we have an idea of how many informants we are likely to need to carry out our study and get the results we hope and wish for, we need to address the issue of how likely we are to get access to these informants and where. We also need to consider whether ethics committee approval is needed and if we need signed consent forms.

Ethical Approval

Most universities and other organisations require all studies involving human participants to have approval from an ethics committee – in the university world, this is usually the university ethics committee. It is essential that ethics approval is obtained before informants are approached and data is collected.

In the case of students undertaking a study as part of their degree, the teacher of the course in question has most likely already sought and acquired ethical approval for the types of projects generally carried out on that course. Hence the student only needs to verify this with the teacher. However, if the student wishes to carry out a study that is radically different from what the teacher has received approval for, then it is possible that the student together with the teacher need to contact the ethics committee to see if further approval is necessary.

Consent

Whereas many types of studies that involve observation, intervention and experiments require the informants to first be thoroughly informed about the study and then asked to sign a consent form, questionnaire studies do not require consent forms since the informant consents to take part by filling in the questionnaire and handing it to the researcher. Even so, the researcher should include some information about the study, what participation entails, anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time for any reason for the informant to read before starting to fill in the questionnaire. If the research has ethics committee approval, that reference number should also be stated.

In the case of an internet questionnaire, it is often not possible to remove a participant's responses once they have filled in the questionnaire and submitted it, since no personal information was entered that would allow the researcher to find the information belonging to the informant wishing to withdraw. In such cases, the following phrase could be used:

It is important that you understand that once you have submitted your responses they cannot be removed from the

study, but that you are free to withdraw without having to explain your withdrawal at any time prior to submission.

Anonymity and Secure Storage

For most questionnaire studies (see below for exceptions), there is absolutely no reason whatsoever to ask for the informant's name. Each informant is given an identification number and the informant's responses are stored together with that number. The name of the informant must not be stored in any format - i.e. on paper or electronically in a file. In the case of informants filling in the questionnaire and submitting it via e-mail, the e-mail must be deleted as soon as the informant's responses have been noted down together with the informant's identification number. Anonymity is absolutely essential and a requirement for ethical approval.

Many intervention studies, experiments and some questionnaire studies require the researcher to know who the informant is because they are tested on more than one occasion and consequently their results from the different occasions need to be matched up. This means that the researcher needs to store personal information. However, this does not mean that the informant's responses, scores, opinions, etc. are stored together with their personal information; on the contrary, the personal information together with the informant's identification number is stored securely in one location (either on a piece of paper that is locked away or in a password protected electronic file) and the test results together with the informant's identification number in another. The fact that personal information will be kept must be disclosed to the informant when seeking consent.

Some researchers prefer to use fake names for their informants rather than identification numbers when they write about their results in an article or essay. This is fine as long as the reader is made aware that the names are made up and that anonymity has not been compromised.

Other Ethical Considerations and Access

While we have discussed what to tell our informants, we have actually not discussed who to recruit (please see my paper on Recruiting a Representative Sample) and how to get hold of them. Getting access to informants is a delicate and often time consuming task that must not be rushed.

If the study involves children as informants, it might be possible to get access via their school. In such circumstances, it is vital that the school is first approached to approve the study. If approval is obtained, the school can aid in letting parents know about the study (e.g. through parent meetings and/or information leaflets sent home with the children) and thus children can be recruited. These steps are necessary, since children cannot be approached without prior parental consent and parents cannot be approached in and around

schools without prior school approval. It might even be necessary to obtain disclosure (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service>).

School approval also applies to adult informants accessed through a school or college. In addition, if it is a teacher who is doing the research and it is his/her pupils/students who are the informants, it is particularly important to reassure the informants that participation is voluntary and that whether they participate or not will have no effect whatsoever on their grades and education. Teacher-student relations are one of many potential power relations that require special ethical considerations.

Student projects often rely on family and friends as informants. While this is perfectly acceptable to do - if one's family and friends constitute a representative sample - it is still important to ask whether participating in the study could have a negative impact on their lives.

Summary

All studies include ethical considerations - some more and some less - and most studies require ethical approval in one or more forms. Ethics is an essential part of research design.